

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
20 July 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

***“This is Us: Blaming & Shaming Ourselves into Despair
This is Good News: God Holds, Hears, & Heals us with Care”***

Fifth Sermon in the Summer Series: *This is Us: Seeing Ourselves in Scripture...Reflecting Good News in our Lives*

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Jonah 1:11-17; 2:1-10

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

In a moment when the sea is raging and everyone is desperately trying to row for their lives and find their balance on the chaotic waves of crises as the storms just keep coming and they are fighting to stay above surface on choppy waters—Jonah goes overboard. He sinks down. And he’s swallowed up by something bigger than himself. To survive the storms of uncertainty and fear, he had to let go and lose control.

It sounds scary, and it is. Yet Jonah did not jump to his death; he dove into the depths of God’s love, God’s care and provision. After all his running, who would have thought that the belly of a fish would be the sacred, safe space for Jonah to be held, heard, and healed?

God is surprising. And perhaps the more predictable we humans are, the more surprising God becomes.

We are in week two of four of journeying with Jonah as he:

1) gets a call from God to preach good news to his worst enemy (the Ninevites) and runs away from that call by getting on a ship sailing in the opposite direction;

2) gets thrown overboard from that ship during a storm (attributed to his actions) and is swallowed up by a fish where he prays to God in the darkness and solitude of the fish’s guts;

3) gets vomited up onto shore (delivered from death) and has a second chance to follow God’s call and preach repentance to the Ninevites which he does—and it works! (a preacher’s dream scenario!);

and 4) gets upset about the fact that he was effective in his preaching and that the Ninevites actually repent and change their ways, which makes Jonah have

to grapple with the ‘unfair’ reality (in his mind) that God’s grace is for ALL people—disrupting Jonah’s dualistic understanding of the world which (to him) has clear “good guys” and “bad guys.”

Franciscan priest Father Richard Rohr says, “*The sign of Jonah is a symbol of surrender, of letting go, of giving up. Most of us wouldn’t describe those as the stages of the journey of enlightenment,*”¹ by they are Jonah, and they are for us too. Rohr calls Jonah an “imperfect prophet” and in his journey we can see our own. In so many ways, Jonah’s journey is really about a move from living in our Despair to experiencing God’s Care.

Jonah is despairing and losing hope. After all, this story attributes the raging, stormy seas to God’s anger at Jonah for running away from God’s call. And as if ‘divine wrath’ isn’t enough, the other men on the boat clearly blame Jonah for the storm too and they know that they need to do something with him to quiet the storm. Jonah, feeling guilt for causing the storm to happen and for causing

harm to these other people, accepts responsibility and says, “*Yes, this is my fault. Throw me into the sea, and then ‘all will be well.’*”

Now the other men on the boat are not cool with this plan at first. While they do blame Jonah for the storm, and Jonah accepts responsibility, they do not wish death upon him; and they row hard to try to make it shore. But as they get nowhere fast, they then point fingers and pray—they don’t want God to punish *them* for *Jonah’s* actions; they reiterate *he* is the guilty one, not them. They are afraid they will live with life-long guilt if they throw him overboard and he dies. Will God hold them accountable for Jonah’s death? They are worried about that but more than anything they are worried about their own lives. They choose to save themselves and throw Jonah overboard and indeed the storm ceases.

And the way the story is told, God not only provides care to Jonah by having a fish swallow him instead of him drowning at sea, AND God provides care to the men on the boat by having the storm cease, which in turn

¹ Richard Rohr, “Jonah and God’s Scandalous Mercy: Weekly Summary,” *Center for Action and Contemplation* (12 July 2025), accessed on July 20, 2025

at <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/jonah-and-gods-scandalous-mercy-weekly-summary/>.

saves their lives as well. The story of Jonah is written so that God's care and mercy and grace is always for ALL, never just for one party or person over another.

Yet it's a very human tendency that when bad things happen, it's natural to want to assign blame to one person or one entity—as we saw in Texas recently with the flooding in the hill country. Whose fault was it that so many people died? We need there to be “fault” because it explains the unexplainable. And we need to be able to point fingers of blame because if we can locate responsibility outside of ourselves onto a person or entity then if we deal with person or entity, we give ourselves the illusion of protection and security. This kind of tragedy won't happen again if we can assign blame properly. It gives us a false sense of control.

The finger pointing in Texas around these floods started quickly. Who's fault is it? Is it climate change? Is it the recent cuts to the national weather service? Is it the fact there were no sirens? Was it lack of organization and notification on the local level? Was it lack of immediate response on the

federal level from FEMA? Was it the fault of camps who built cabins too close to floodways? Or people who went camping and didn't listen to flood warnings pinging their cell phones in the middle of the night?

While key questions of prevention and safety and accountability are always important and welcome in these situations as we always need to be learning how we can be better prepare in the future, the truth is, often blaming does nothing more than serve to give the person pointing the finger a sense of control about a situation that otherwise feels like chaos. Again, if there is a someone (or anyone!) to blame, then we can feel safe in the future that if that person or entity is dealt with, this won't happen again. And, of course, there are some situations in life where there is clear blame to be had on side of a situation, but many, many, many situations in life are just more muddy and complex. Fault is rarely found just in one person or one entity.

I say this to say that in the story of Jonah, Yes the storm at sea is attributed to Jonah and he accepts the blame for that and for his actions, but the situation

doesn't end there. And this is what so often happens in our lives too when we experience the initial relief of blaming another.

Jonah *internalizes* the blame and guilt for this situation, and it turns into something much deeper and long-lasting: shame. And yes, there is probably a lot more going on inside of him than just this one decision he made to run from God. Perhaps this decision was the culmination of other poor choices—the straw that broke the camel's back, or perhaps Jonah didn't think himself worthy enough to be a good prophet anymore or perhaps Jonah literally just couldn't stand that God could care about his enemies and in turn that made Jonah question whether he was perhaps God's enemy instead of the Ninevites. Jonah lived in a very dualistic “good guy” / “bad guy” understanding of the world. So if the Ninevites deserve a second chance perhaps Jonah thought then, “*Well, wow. This whole time I've had it wrong: “I'm the Bad Guy, not them.”*”

² ‘A Strain of Jonah the Prophet,’ [Carmen de Jona et Ninive] trans., S. Thelwall: ‘Appendix’ in *Tertullian, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol IV*, eds. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Edinburgh 1885), p128.

We don't know what contributed to Jonah's mindset, but he clearly felt himself unworthy; he blamed himself, and the blame wasn't just for a behavior; he felt shame about his core being—deeming himself not worthy to be in the presence of God.

In a poem attributed to 2nd-3rd century theologian Tertullian called *Carmen de Jona et Ninive*, Jonah is heard to exclaim: “*In me is the storm. I am all the madness of the world.*” Then as he prays in the fish, he says, “*It is in me / That the sea rises, and the upper air / Down rushes; land in me is far, death near, / And hope in God is none.*”² Similarly Martin Luther notes, “*a much greater storm was raging in Jonah's heart and conscience than raged on the sea outside.*”³

Social scientist Brené Brown has been researching and writing on shame and guilt for 25+ years. In her book *Atlas of the Heart*, she distinguishes guilt and shame in this way:

Guilt—I did something bad.

Shame—I am bad.

³ Paul Murray, *A Journey with Jonah: The Spirituality of Bewilderment* (Dublin, Ireland: Columbia Press, 2002), pg 25.

Guilt—*I did something bad*. The focus with guilt is on behavior. Guilt is the discomfort we feel when we evaluate what we've done or failed to do against our values. It can drive positive change and behavior.

Shame—*I am bad*. The focus with shame is on self, not behavior. The result is feeling flawed and unworthy of love, belonging, and connection. Shame is not a driver of positive change.

Example:

Guilt—You get back a quiz and your grade is F. Your self-talk is 'Going to the party instead of studying for this quiz was so stupid. [You recognize your bad grade came not from your competence or from how capable or smart you are or are not; your grade was an F because you made poor choices.]

Shame—You get back a quiz and your grade is F. Your self-talk is 'I'm so stupid.'⁴ [Not, I made stupid choices, I AM stupid.]

We see Jonah moving from feeling healthy and normal guilt in the boat when he accepts responsibility for his actions to feeling shame and unworthiness in the belly of the fish—he questions whether he deserves belonging with and connection to God, praying: "*I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look upon your holy temple? The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever;*" (2:4-6a).

Remember that back in these times, the temple represented the literal, physical location of God's presence so Jonah is saying he is not even worthy to look at the presence of God *and* that God also does not want to even look at him, having driven him away.

Of course, this is simply not true. God has done everything but drive Jonah away. God has remained with Jonah even as *he* ran away, and God has saved Jonah in this moment with the fish. And the paradoxical yet oh-so-relatable thing is—Jonah

⁴ Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience* (New York: Random House) 2021, pg 134.

knows this too. He *also* prays, “*I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; ...you brought up my life from the Pit...you delivered me...*” (2:1, 6b).

Jonah’s emotional prayer of mixed messages reflects our own human experience of guilt, shame, and self-doubt. We often know something to be true up here (point to head)—God is good; God is love; Pastor Anne says there is nothing we can do to separate us from God’s love—yet in here (point to heart and gut)—we just can’t believe that what is true for other people is also true for us. So our self-talk becomes, “*My life is falling apart, so surely that means God doesn’t love me.*”

I don’t know about you, but often my prayers are full of mixed messages and not quite sound theology that doesn’t actually jive with what I would state that I believe if asked objectively. We are all over the place as humans with our thinking/feeling/doing centers—and that’s what we see happening with Jonah. But if you begin to wonder if God is somehow punishing you, or if God is far from you, or if you wonder maybe you aren’t faithful enough and that is why

your prayers aren’t being answered like you hoped... Well, these are all signs—theological signs—that indicate you may be experience the emotion of shame or unworthiness.

Theological trauma can cause us to believe we are not worthy of God’s love; so can physical abuse or emotional abuse, and so can Depression since that disease lies to us about what is true or not true about ourselves or the world.

No matter what is causing our shame, it’s not something we can just ‘snap out of’ ourselves. In fact, Brené Brown’s research has revealed a couple key learnings:

1. We all have shame. It’s universal and one of the most primitive emotions that we experience. The only people who do not experience it are those who lack the capacity for empathy and human connection. So if you feel shame, pat yourself on the back, that means you feel empathy too and that’s a good thing!
2. We’re all afraid to talk about shame...but the less we talk about shame, the more

control it has over us. Shame hates being spoken.⁵

This is because, as Brené Brown reports, *“Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection. ...Shame thrives in secrecy, silence, and judgment.”*⁶

The good news? Brown’s research reveals that:

The antidote to shame is empathy. If we reach out and share our shame experience with someone who responds with empathy, shame dissipates. Shame needs you to believe that you’re alone. Empathy is a hostile environment for shame.

Self-compassion also helps us move through shame, but we need empathy as well for an important reason: Shame is a social emotion. Shame happens between people, and it heals between people. Even if I feel it alone, shame is the way I see myself through someone else’s eyes. [So being able to be seen by another for who we truly are is healing.]⁷

This is where the second chapter in Jonah’s story comes in though. There are three things we can learn from Jonah’s time in the belly of the fish. We learn some “next best steps” to take if we are feeling crushed in the chaos of our lives, stuck in the self-critical shame cycle.

First, as much as you are able remove yourself from the crashing waves of the stormy chaos around you or the people who are feeding the crisis or the external voices that are blaming and shaming you. Find a sacred space to be by yourself; pull away to pray or meditate or reflect or just sit in silence.

Maybe, like Jonah, you’ll be forced into this space by someone or by a circumstance beyond your control. Life often throws us into the metaphorical “belly of the fish” whether we want to be there or not. But you don’t have to wait for that moment. You can make a choice to take control and seek out that contemplative, quiet, sacred, safe space now.

Jonah was held or protected in the belly of the fish to feel all that he was feeling. He could

⁵ Brown, pg 136.

⁶ Brown, pg 137.

⁷ Brown, pg 138.

finally ‘let go’ and not pretend like he had to hold it all together.

We all need safe spaces of solitude to pray and be and think and cry and work stuff out. God provided the space of a smelly fish gut for Jonah. I say that to remind you that we often think of spaces of solitude and reflection as beautiful mountain hikes or sitting on the sand, letting the waves lap at our feet, or being in a sanctuary or on a comfy couch with a cup of tea. But your place may not look perfect, and we need not wait to find or create the perfect atmosphere for quiet and contemplation. The silence is more important than the surroundings. Take what you can get; fish guts and all! There is no perfect time or place.

As my colleague Jason Edwards wrote this week on Facebook, *“Our ancient nervous systems can’t keep up with a never-ending loop of crisis, scandal, violence, and grief. Our spirits need rhythm. Our souls need space. In the words of poet John O’Donohue, “When the mind is festooned with anxiety, it can neither see clearly nor dream freely.” Saturating ourselves in every [personal crisis or] global tension does not make us more*

faithful. It makes us more frantic.”

So first, we find quiet, we find solitude, even for just a moment or a breath.

Second, you speak your truth—pray to God or share with a trusted person in your life what you are going through. Allow yourself to be heard. Remember, shame hates secrecy. Jonah isn’t sure about what he feels or doesn’t feel. His prayer is full of lament and praise, gratitude and guilt. He doesn’t worry about whether his prayer is coherent or theologically sound or if it’s what God wants to hear or expects to hear; Jonah prays. And a whole mix of stuff comes out. He releases all that he’s holding and all that has a hold of him. God hears Jonah. God listens. No judgment.

We all need to be heard...by God...and by one another.

Who can be the one who hears you this week? Who can you speak truth to without censoring and/or without that person needing to fix your situation or give you advice?

Quaker author and teacher Parker Palmer speaks to this very thing when he writes,

Witnessing and companioning take time and patience, which we often lack—especially when we’re in the presence of suffering so painful we can barely stand to be there, as if we were in danger of catching a contagious disease. We want to apply our “fix,” then cut and run, figuring we’ve done the best we can to “save” the other person...

...The human soul doesn’t want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed — to be seen, heard and companioned exactly as it is. When we make that kind of deep bow to the soul of a suffering person, our respect reinforces the soul’s [own] healing resources, the only resources that can help the sufferer make it through.

...we have something better [to give than advice or a fix-it plan]: [we give] our gift of self in the form of personal presence and attention, the kind that invites the other’s soul to show up.⁸

This is such a deep truth. When we are held and heard, we can be healed. Healed from shame. Maybe not forever, but for at least a moment. And every time we are held and heard the healing comes and stays a bit longer between the stints of pain, blame, shame, and guilt.

It’s *after* Jonah is in the safety and solitude of the belly of the fish, and *after* he has prayed to God and his prayers have been heard, that he is then ‘healed’ or ‘delivered’ as the text says. The word translated as deliverance here in Jonah 2:9, is actually יְשׁוּעָה yeshûw‘âh, in Hebrew, which means “salvation”—as in balm, healing, aid, health, welfare, holistic well-being.

Is Jonah’s shame cycle over forever? No. But it’s at least interrupted in this moment—dis-rupted—and we’ll see how next week he uses this moment of healing to heed God’s call and take a second chance to go preach repentance to the Ninevites.

I think it’s safe to say we are all feeling tossed about on chaotic stormy waves right now, scared and anxious and perhaps

⁸ Parker Palmer, My Misgivings about Advice, *Awakin.org*, accessed on July 20, 2025 at <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2188>.

pointing fingers of blame at others—and maybe even ourselves—for the storms that we find ourselves in...wondering if our life is over or all uphill from here, or if our country is going to capsize, our world burn up or implode.

Blame and Shame are powerful emotions that will keep us in cycling in despair, that will keep us feeling hopelessness. That is their superpower. Yet that is *not* what God wants for us. Maybe we need to find ways to stop blaming others for all the chaos we feel around us and dive into the choppy waters...perhaps jump into the very places that scare us and see how they can transform us, or really, how God is ready and waiting to transform us as we face courageously all that is before us. Taking accountability for our part and letting others take accountability for theirs.

We can choose to stay on the surface of the sea, allowing ourselves to be rocked by every wave of chaos crashing over us, OR we can dive deeper than surface level, facing the depths head on. Allowing ourselves to get swallowed up by something bigger than our own egos and false sense of control...allowing God to hold us and hear us out

and heal us...before getting vomited up onto the Shores of Second Chances.

Do we believe there are shores of new beginnings ahead? If so, how will we get there? Probably not by frantically rowing in the storm. And I get it. It's hard to dive deep and take a risk. It's hard to self-reflect. It's hard to be vulnerable. It's hard to allow ourselves to be held and heard, but when we do—we have a chance at healing. And when we are healed, we then can become the holders and the 'hearers' for others—offering the healing care of Christ that every single person in our world needs right now.

Who would have thought that our deepest soul-searching begins in the belly of a fish surrounded by stinky muck. Sounds about right in this day and time, doesn't it?

Just as God is always ready hold you and hear you and heal you; God is always ready to lead you and guide you on the next steps of your journey too. Wherever they may lead...

Amen.