

“Saved by the Whale”

A couple weeks ago John Dominic Crossan was in Statesville to deliver a series of lectures at one of our local churches. You may have seen some of the newspaper articles and editorials in the paper about his recent visit. Crossan is a former Catholic priest who abandoned the faith of the church apostolic and started the Jesus Seminar.

The Jesus Seminar states that its goal is to get down to the historical Jesus, the real Jesus, and in order for them to do that they think you have to abandon much of the teaching that is contained in the gospels. In short, they believe that most of what Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had to say about Jesus is not true. The reason they believe this is because they think that the writings of the four gospels are skewed by the lens of faith, or even worse nothing more than just wishful thinking.

They believe that the faith of the first disciples and apostles got in the way of them being able to tell the historical truth about Jesus. Jesus had been crucified and his disciples wanted him to be alive. Consequently, they created a story about his resurrection so that the first followers of Jesus would not drown in an ocean of despair. They wanted Jesus alive so they told a story about him being alive, even though it was not historically true.

So according to the Jesus Seminar, the darling theologians of many liberal and mainline churches, what you have in the gospels is the Jesus of faith, not the historical Jesus. The power of the gospels only lies in its meaning, not in the historical accuracy of its claims. The miracles are not real and most certainly the bodily resurrection of Jesus is not real. These are just stories meant to inspire hope in the hearts of Jesus’ grieving followers.

Crossan, by his own admission, says that Jesus’ body after his death was dumped in a Roman trash heap, and consumed by dogs and jackals.

The Connection between Jonah and the Whale and Jesus and the Bodily Resurrection

That is why I say Crossan abandoned the faith of the church apostolic, and that is why I say he is not a Christian. I do not judge him, his own words judge him. I do not judge him, the Word of God judges him. The apostle Paul said in I Corinthians 15:12-14,

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

The reason I bring this up is twofold. First, Jesus, in his ministry, links his own bodily resurrection to being like that of Jonah being in the whale. “For just as Jonah was three days and

three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” And the second reason I bring it up is because the miracle of Jesus’ bodily resurrection is far greater than that of Jonah being in a whale.

There are many people who read the story of Jonah and they chuckle at it. They say it did not happen. That could not ever happen. A man is swallowed up by a whale and then spewed out alive, three days later? Come on, that is silly. Do you really expect me to believe that fable?

So my point here is that if you dismiss the story of Jonah as being true on the grounds that something like that could never happen, then you absolutely must dismiss the bodily resurrection as being a true because the bodily resurrection is a far greater miracle.

If it is impossible for Jonah get swallowed up by a whale and live then it is absolutely impossible for Jesus to be bodily resurrected from the grave and live. The bodily resurrection, by far, is the greater miracle.

What I am doing here is somewhat of a distraction from the overall point of what I want to focus on in this message, but it is a worthy detour.

The Problem of Unbelief and the Importance of Faith

The story of Jonah does expose within many of us a lurking unbelief in the miraculous. We westerners are so imprisoned by our rationality that we often leave little room for the miraculous in our lives. Some of us reject the idea that this story could be true solely on the grounds that things like this do not happen, and that is sad.

While it is true that there are many scholars who hold to a high view of Scripture and believe in the miraculous, but who also believe that Jonah is a parable or a sermon on Israel’s unwillingness to take the gospel to the Gentile nations; therefore it is not necessary to take it as historical fact, there are also many people who reject its historicity solely on the grounds that miracles like this do not happen. That is unfortunate, so maybe one thing that God wants to do to us this morning is expose within some of us our lack of faith in God being able to do the miraculous. Some of us need to have more faith in God than what we have.

“For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will be move, and nothing will be impossible for you.” (Matt. 17:20-21)

“Without faith it is impossible to please God.” (Heb. 11:6)

For it is definitely faith that prompted Jonah to make his prayer from the belly of the fish. He knew that he deserved to drown. In fact, he told the sailors that he was running from God and that they needed to throw him overboard if they wanted the storm to stop.

Jonah does not deserve to live, yet he prays anyway. That takes great faith on his part.

Jonah Hits Rock Bottom

Jonah, both literally and figuratively, has hit rock bottom. Only then, in faith, does he cry out to God to save him.

He has hit rock bottom because he is running from God. He is *really* running from God, as far as one can go. He is going in the totally opposite direction. God called him east to go to Nineveh. Jonah got on a ship and headed west for Tarshish. When we do that we will hit rock bottom.

The story of Jonah, in many ways, reminds me of the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

In that parable the younger son demands that his father give him his share of the inheritance and then he runs away as far as he can from the loving care and provision of his father and he hits rock bottom. In a far away land he takes his inheritance and squanders it in wild living. Soon he finds himself without work in a time of famine. This forces him to take a job working with pigs, the lowest of lows for a Jew, since a pig is an unclean animal. Only then, after hitting rock bottom, does he come to his senses and seek the mercy of his father.

Jonah's situation is sort of like that. He too runs as far away as he can from God's loving provision and call in his life. This running from God leads Jonah to hit rock bottom. It does not get any lower than running from God's call in your life. It is a recipe for misery.

But literally speaking, Jonah hits rock bottom as well. He is drowning to death. He is sinking to the very bottom of the ocean, much like Peter was when he took his eyes of Christ. His drowning is graphically portrayed in his prayer.

For you hurled me into the deep,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers
swept over me.

The waters closed in over me to take my life,
the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.
To the roots of the mountains I sank down;
the earth beneath barred me forever.

That's better than the movies. I can see that picture and imagine it in my mind's eye. When you read it, it feels like you are experiencing it in slow motion. But that's where Jonah is. He is at the roots of the mountain, the very bottom of the sea, and only then does he cry out to God in his spirit,

When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, Lord,
and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.

That's what salvation is. It is being at a point or place of desperation in one's life. It does not matter whether or not a person put himself there, or whether one is simply the victim of an injustice or tragic circumstance. What matters is that you are dying, either literally or figuratively, and you need not just God's help, you need His salvation. You can do nothing in your own strength to save yourself. The only thing you can do is cry out to God, like Jonah, for his mercy and grace.

There Is Salvation in Hitting Rock Bottom

Hitting rock bottom, as bad as that sometimes is, is not always totally a bad thing. Sometimes God uses our hitting rock bottom to cause us to look once again towards God's holy temple. Salvation, life, can only be found in God alone and sometimes it takes us hitting rock bottom to bring us back to that reality.

And the good news of the gospel is that when we come to that place of drowning and we cry out to God in faith, God will send the great fish to get us back to dry land, even if we do not deserve it.

I know this story can be pressed too far because people do die and people do drown. Sometimes people cry out to God and are saved from their physical circumstances, and then sometimes they are not. This world is fallen and we Christians are not immune from the sting of death, but once again the good news of the gospel is that the sting of death does not get the final word for those in Christ. Jesus does.

Jesus Christ conquered the power of sin and death in the world through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave, and so too will those who trust in him as Lord and Savior for their salvation.

For just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days and three nights, so too was the Son of Man in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.

And just the Lord sent a great fish to save dead man Jonah, so too did the Father raise the Son of Man from the dead on the third day, for our salvation.

Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?

For the sting of death is sin, but thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord!

- I Cor. 15:55-56

Amen.