

“Facing Fear”

Jonah: Renegade Prophet, Pt 2

We are starting the year with a series about a religious leader from a nation that considered itself uniquely blessed by God, a nation that had an on-again, off-again enemy in the Middle East – a terrorist state by all accounts, with an aggressively rivalist religion – but an enemy that was in decline at this particular moment in history, allowing our hero’s nation to prosper and expand its boundaries. But now, God called our protagonist to travel to the capital city of this enemy state and preach to them so that they might repent, turn to God and be blessed themselves.

Instead, patriot that he was, he jumped on the first drone heading the other way. Well, let’s not stretch the analogy too far! But the truth is, the Old Covenant Book of Jonah has an awful lot to say to our contemporary situation. It is a short book that is jam packed with transformational truths – some we might not *want* to hear – but all that we are in desperate need of.

Quick review, last week we saw in the first few verses that Jonah was a prophet of Israel, and God sent him to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria with a message of warning and repentance.

And what Jonah does, of course, is he runs away. He refuses to do it. He goes in another direction. Nineveh is in modern day Iraq, and Jonah boards a ship for Tarshish, which is in Spain. He’s on the run. Why? Because Jonah has in his heart two deep currents – I hesitate to call them “feelings” because they’re so stronger than that word implies. The two reasons he runs are fear and anger.

He’s afraid to go to Nineveh, because why put himself in the very midst of his enemies, but he’s also filled with hate toward them. See if they reject his message they may kill him – or *worse*, the Assyrians made a name for torture. But if they *receive* his message, then God may forgive them and they could be back on top, and who wants that for your enemy?

So fear and anger go together. The reality is, anger is always a secondary emotion. It’s not primary, there is always something else lurking behind it. Frustration can lead to anger – Austin traffic? Shame and embarrassment can lead to anger. Grief can lead to anger – we live in a society that tells men, for instance that it’s more acceptable to express anger than sadness – by the way this is what’s behind almost all divorce acrimony; staunch the wounds of pain with face-saving anger. But one of the biggest causes of anger is fear.

Now, if you study Hebrew literary context, it will show you that the theme of the passage we are looking at this morning is clearly meant to be fear. The chapter opens, closes and centers on the mention of fear. As I read it in a moment, watch for the idea of fear throughout. Notice in verse 5, the storm comes up, and it says they were *afraid*. In verses 10 and 11, it says the storm gets higher, and they are *terrified*. Finally, you get down to the very end, and the storm gets calm in verse 16, and they were filled with *great fear*. So clearly, there's something we're to learn about the concept of fear from this chapter. And I don't know about you, but I could use some help dealing with fear.

So let's read the text and then we'll break it down. God called Jonah, Jonah Uber-ed a ship and ran. Part of this we read last week, but we need a little overlap. So, **Jonah 1:4–17**, *“Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. 5 All the sailors **were afraid** and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.*

6 The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.” 7 Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

8 So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?” 9 He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.”

*10 This **terrified them** and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.) 11 The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?” 12 “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”*

13 Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. 14 Then they cried to the Lord, “O Lord, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O Lord, have done as you pleased.”

*15 Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. 16 At this the men **greatly feared** the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him. 17 But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.*

Now, that last verse about the fish really belongs to the next chapter and we'll look at that next week. But for today, let's see what this has to tell us about the nature of fear, and we'll use three things to get us there; the storm, the sailors and the substitute. The stormy sea shows us who we are, the religious sailors show us the *wrong* thing to do about it, and the willing substitute shows us the *right* thing.

First of all, The stormy sea. I'm going to be brief about this, but it's interesting. **Verse 5:** "*All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god.*" Now, stereotypically, what do we know about sailors as a class? If you say that somebody is "acting like a sailor on shore leave" is that code for "they went to church"? No. They're not terribly devout...but a storm comes up, and what do we see? Each one is "crying out", they're praying.

And the first thing we learn here, which is important, is storms tend to reveal who we really are. In spite of what you *say* to people, and in spite of what you say to yourself, storms - suffering, troubles, death - storms reveal to us that deep in our hearts we're all God-knowers and God-needers. No matter what you tell yourself, no matter what you say, deep down inside you know there is a God, and you know you need Him. Storms bring that out.

There's a haunting place in something Mark Twain wrote autobiographically near the end of his life, when one of his family members was sick. I can't remember if it was his wife or a daughter, but someone he cared deeply about was very sick. And to his distress he found himself praying. He said, "I prayed. I prayed like a coward. I prayed like a dog."

Now the reason he was so distressed was because Mark Twain was a skeptic, and Mark Twain had very, very strong beliefs *against* Christianity - well-worked-out doubts about God - but *in the storm* he cried out. It was like he couldn't help it, like it was an involuntary muscle or something. There was an involuntary reflex in him toward God.

Now, you know, skeptics are constantly saying, "So what? People get into trouble, they get into danger, and they pray. It doesn't prove there's a God." That's not what I'm saying. Listen, this involuntary reflex people find in their hearts in times of darkness and trouble and storms, this almost involuntary reflex to pray and cry out is *not* evidence to skeptics for the existence of God; it's actually evidence from God against the existence of skeptics.

See, in Romans 1, Paul argues that nobody is a real skeptic. You may tell yourself and you may blog about your doubts in Religion 101, but deep down inside your heart nature has revealed that there's a God. And that's proven in times of storm. Because in times of storm, you see you're a dependent, fragile, helpless being who is not in control of things.

C.S. Lewis says that the human heart is like a cellar in that if you want to know what's really lurking down there, you have to surprise it. Now, we don't have basements in Texas, but we've all seen enough TV and movies to understand the metaphor. Listen to this, "If there are rats in the cellar you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats: it only prevents them from hiding. In the same way the suddenness of the provocation does not make me an ill-tempered man; it only shows me what an ill-tempered man I am. The rats are always there in the cellar, but if you go in shouting and noisily they will have taken cover before you switch on the light." (*Mere Christianity*)

Basically he's saying that a pop quiz is the best indicator of what you really know. The storm is the pop quiz of your soul. In other words, here's how you know what your heart really is - how you know who you really are. Not when you can deliberately act in a way you want to think of yourself as or you want other people to think of, but when your instincts, your

reflexes, are engaged. In the storm, you know there's a God. *That's* the real you.

You know there are some of you here in the church, and when I see you in church, my first thought is, "Oh my, what's wrong?" Because your pattern is to come to church when the storm clouds appear. When the sky's are sunny and bright you get distracted by all kinds of other things, but when the lightning strikes you get real focused on God – you're here every week. That's the pattern of our age.

And I'm not meaning to insult anyone, I *want* you to find shelter from the storm here. It's just if you'd make this your lifestyle, the storms – while they would still appear – they would generally seem a bit smaller. But that's what storms do, they reveal us to be dependent people who need God. So that's the first thing, now what are we going to do about it?

For that we turn to look secondly at the religious sailors. Most people get religious when the storms come. There are no atheists in fox holes, as they say. Do you remember after 9/11 when everybody started going to church? I mean *everybody*, the churches were packed. The President was telling us to go to our houses of worship and we did. I had a theory that maybe Osama Ben Laden was a *pastor* – it was good for business! Get religious. Pray. And we did. But it didn't last, did it? It didn't. Actually church attendance has been in a steady decline ever since 9/11.

I think this text is telling us why. It shows us why just getting religious in response to fear isn't going to work. See this text shows us these sailors being pushed into, actually, a kind of a process of religious development by their fear in the storm. So the first stage in verses 5–10, were we see them progress from being nominal idolaters and polytheists, to becoming *devout* polytheists, and they're all crying to their own god, but that's not enough.

Then they start to actually move over in the second half to cry out to Yahweh, the true God. In v.6, - by the way, it's almost comical, one commentator calls Jonah the great parody of the Bible – but the story says, *The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish."* Do you see what's happening? Their own gods aren't working. But in the spirit – literally - of "any port in a storm", they come down and say to Jonah, "Oh! Do you have a god? Ours aren't working. Give me yours!"

Because you see, they would have expected his god to be there. Everybody had their own god - they were statues, they were images - and you brought your gods with you on trips. Like my daughter brings her teddy bear on trips. And the whole point of this part of the narration is the terror comes, and they begin to get religious, and it *doesn't* help them.

See, first, they're polytheistic – multiple gods. Then they get orthodox, and it still doesn't help them. They're terrified. And they get more and more terrified. Why? Why doesn't religion work? Well, let's take a look at the two stages. The first stage is less religious people who rely on material things are absolutely defenseless against fear. I say material things, because these sailors had material gods.

Do we understand what I mean when I say polytheistic? Quick Greek lesson: *theos* = "god", *poly* = "many", *monos* = "one". See, the Jews were monotheistic, they believed in one transcendent, overarching God of the universe – Judaism, Islam and Christianity are the three great monotheistic religions of our day. But most ancient peoples believed in many gods – polytheism.

Another way to look at it is, they didn't see one God that created everything, but rather they saw every created thing as a god. So the sea, trade, farming, sexuality, the sun, on and on, all these could be worshiped, and it was up to you to decide what you were going to worship. You couldn't do them all, so some people worshiped the business god, and some people worshiped the sexuality god, and some people worshiped their family's gods or their city's gods or their nation's gods.

In other words, you choose the entity that most affects you personally, and you make that material thing your god. You make it your hope. You make it the thing that is really the center of your life, and you worship that. Now, that's not too far from what Austin is like. Of course most people in Austin are very secular, and would think they've evolved beyond those primitive times, but not really.

We've come full circle, because most people in Austin don't believe in a sort of overarching, universal God. They don't go to synagogue or church and that sort of thing. And yet, every human being has to look to *something* for their meaning in life. Every human being has to have *something* they invest in. We talk about this all the time at SWFF.

In other words, even when a person says, "I'm not religious," the fact is you have to find some material thing, whether it's your career or it's romance or it's your family or it's your children or it's your art or whatever, and you say, "*That's* the thing that really gives my life meaning, and that's my god in a sense." Well, the first thing the narrative of these sailors tells us is that finite material thing you turn to *besides* God or *more than* God is shown to be inferior in a storm. Do you know why? *Because* they're in the boat with you, they sink right along with you!

In fact, if you cling to a god carved of stone during a stormy sea, you'll just sink to the bottom faster! A very tragic example from the news this week. It was reported that a Hollywood producer about my own age took his life a few days ago. He had produced a hit show about a decade ago called "Ugly Betty" – my wife really liked it and it won some Emmys.

And so one of the obituaries mentioned an interview they had done with him in 2008 at the pinnacle of his success. "My first year doing this, people would constantly ask me, 'Aren't you happy? You must be thrilled. You've got a hit show. You must be having the time of your life.' Well, no, I'm not. It's all consuming...I was so exhausted by the time I got home on Friday night, I was just paralyzed. I didn't want to go out. I didn't want to socialize and I had so much work to do. That was it. That was my life."

(Silvio Horta)

See, even when he got what he wanted – he climbed the mountain, he got the awards – it wasn't enough. It wasn't filling that emptiness. It wasn't calming the storm. And then the article went on to say that since then he "had struggled to follow up his success with *Ugly Betty*; he had multiple shows in development, but nothing ever got on the air." It's very sad. The mountain top didn't lift him out of the storm and the valley sunk him.

A storm is a storm. Nobody just walks through storms. Nobody just sails through storms. Storms are terrible. But if the thing you have centered your life on, the *real* thing that makes you feel good about yourself, if it's not greater than the storm, it's of no help, because it will just sink with you. In other words, any finite thing is susceptible to storms, just like you are. Circumstances can take them away. Disease and enemies and economic downturns can take them away. They're in the boat with you, as it were. You cry out to your gods, but how can they help you? They're in the boat with you. They're going to sink with you. So see, less religious people who live for material things, they are defenseless against fears and storms.

But, somebody says, "Okay. What you really want then is you want us to come to your church. Not live for career and sex and money and things like that. Come to church. Obey the Ten Commandments. Just say 'No' to a whole lot of things you used to say 'Yes' to. Become ethical. Become Christian. Read the Bible. Pray. Go to Bible studies and all that sort of thing. Then I'll be safe. Right? Because if I do all that, then I know God will protect me. I won't live for material things. I'll live for God."

Be careful. Of course, that's part of the answer, *and yet*, here's what I want you to see. Religious people can cling to spirituality in a way that will not protect against fear. Almost always, when people first say, "I'm not going to live for material things; I'm going to live for God," they don't know what that means. And what you see interestingly here is when these guys begin to call out to Yahweh – that's what it says in v.14 when it tells us they weren't calling on their idols anymore, but to "the Lord", that's Yahweh, the God of Israel – but even though they've got the right deity now, they're just as scared, because they're bargaining with God just like they did with the idols.

What do they say? They say, "Look. Your prophet says we're supposed to throw him in. Ok, we want to obey the prophet, but we're scared of you now. We don't want you to kill us. We want to obey, and your prophet says to throw him in, but wait a minute. Isn't that murder? We don't want to disobey. What are we going to do?"

They're scared. They're not opening their hearts to their loving Heavenly Father, banking on His grace. They have entered into a fear-based, bargaining relationship with God. And what I'm trying to show you here, and what the narrative is trying to show you - something *very* important - is you may not deal with your fear very well by just getting religious in general, by just saying, "I'm going to come to church now. I'm going to start to pray."

See, a lot of people say, “I haven’t been going to church. I haven’t had much God in my life, and now these terrible things have happened, and I feel vulnerable, and I feel unsafe. I’m going to go to God. I’m going to start praying, and then I’ll feel safe, because now God is with me. I’m being a good person.” Listen, that is not going to save you from fear.

See, there are three kinds of people in the world. There are irreligious people, there are religious people, and there are Christians. And Christians are people whom, having believed the gospel, know they’re saved by grace. In spite of who they are and in spite of what they’ve done and in spite of the fact they deserve nothing and can earn nothing, by the sheer grace of God because of what Jesus Christ has done, they confess, “I am accepted, and therefore I live a life of gratitude.” It’s a grace-based, gratitude-based relationship.

But most people do not understand the difference. They think of Christianity as just being religious and moral. And what they do is say, “I’m going to read the Bible. I’m going to pray. I’m going to be a good person. I’m going to give my life to Christ. I’m going to try to do everything he says. I’m going to try to live for him,” but what they really mean is, “I’m going to *make* God protect me. I’m going to be so

good he’ll *have* to protect me now. I mean look at what all I’ve done, God *owes* me clear sailing!”

What you’re doing is with your goodness you’re trying to control him. Three kinds of people – and by the way, by far, the religious people are the worst. Oh yeah. They’re the meanest – religion killed Jesus. And they are the most scared – in fact I think it’s their fear that leads to their meanness. Why so much fear? Well, if you start coming to church after some great disaster and you start to feel better at first, but you really don’t understand the difference between grace and religion - between receiving freely from God and striking a bargain with God – you’re just going to live in fear.

For instance, one of the worst things you can do is come listen to a sermon. Does that sound strange coming from a pastor?! But every week, the sermon is going to tell you something else you’re supposed to do to be a good person. “This week, be generous with your money.” You say, “Oh, my gosh! I really have been spending too much on myself.” Next week, “Care for the poor.” The next week, “Forgive your enemies.” Every week, oh, my gosh, you’re getting worse and worse. “How am I ever going to do all this? If God is going to bless me, I have to be good, and every week I see how much more good there is to be!”

The fact of the matter is all kinds of people have approached the true God. They're into orthodoxy like these guys. They're into ethics. They're saying, "Just tell us the rules! Can we kill the prophet or not? What are the rules? We'll do *anything* if you'll just keep us from drowning. Give us the rules." Frankly, that is religion for an awful lot of people. Nice people. Good people. Sincere people. People in the church. But don't you see what we're being told here is religion is not the way to deal with fear? It just opens you to more fear, it doesn't help. What are we going to do?

The stormy sea shows us who we really are - weak, dependent, needy, non self-sufficient creatures. Secondly, the sailors show us that religion in general doesn't help deal with the fear. What will? Third and final point, we have to see **the willing substitute**. In **v. 12a**, Jonah says, "*Pick me up and throw me into the sea...*" Now, I'll tell you I've been reading a wide variety of commentaries on Jonah. These are learned men and women who know Hebrew, and they know ancient texts, and they know ancient literary structure and all that stuff, and none of them can agree on the question, "Why is Jonah doing this?"

"*Pick me up and throw me into the sea...*" Some people said he is coming to his senses, and he sees he has disobeyed God. So what he's saying is, "I have sinned against God. I deserve death. Throw me out." So he's clearly obeying God. He's finally submitting to God.

But other commentators believe what he's really saying is, "I'd rather *die* than go to those dirty Ninevites! I'd rather *die* than to obey God, so go ahead and kill me." Isn't that interesting?

There are two totally different ways of reading this verse. When he says, "*Pick me up and throw me into the sea,*" is he submitting to God or is he rebelling against God? And the answer is...probably somewhere in the middle, because if you look at the rest of what he says, he starts to come to his senses, not because he's looking at God - I don't think - but because he's looking at *them*.

Look at the whole verse. He doesn't say, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea because I deserve it or because I'm trying to get away." What does he say? (**V.12**), "*Pick me up and throw me into the sea,*" he replied, "*and it will become calm. I know that it is **my fault** that this great storm has come **upon you**.*" Now it may only be pity at this point, but this is significant to me. He's finally starting to come to his senses spiritually because he's thinking of somebody besides himself. He's looking at them in love, and he's saying, "Your lives are in jeopardy because of me. This is not right. You should not be dying for me; I should be dying for you. It's *my* fault your lives are in jeopardy. This is not fair. I'm sorry. I don't want you to die for me. I'll die for you. Throw me in."

Now they don't want to do it at first, do they? They're scared to death, but when they finally do it, look at what happens. Calm. **Verse 15:** "*Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this...*" At what? See, that's the question. "*...the men greatly feared...*" Now this just doesn't make sense. Verses 4 and 5, storm = fear. Verses 10 and 11, bigger storm = bigger fear. Verse 15, no storm...what would you expect? No fear. But that's not what it says. *Great* fear. Wait a minute! What's going on here?

It's a different kind of fear when the sun comes out. In **Psalm 130:4**, the psalmist says, "*There is forgiveness with you. You have forgiven me. Therefore, I fear you.*" Now, does that seem counterintuitive? I mean when we think "fear of the Lord" we think of being scared of God, right? He's gonna get you! See a minute ago the sailors were saying, "Don't kill us! Don't kill us!" But now something new has happened. Psalm 130 says, "You forgave me, and therefore, I fear you." And what that has to mean is fear of God means awe and wonder and amazement; an existential grasping of the greatness who God is.

When they saw Jonah say, "Throw me in for you", they saw a willing sacrifice. And they were *amazed* at the sacrifice of love. And they were *amazed* that the wrath of God – which had been so furious – was so suddenly stilled; that God accepted that sacrifice of love. And as a result, they began to experience the *real* fear of God, which is not cowering and being frightened, but being

filled with awe and wonder. It's the fear that casts out all other fear, because it's amazement at His love, at the substitutionary sacrifice.

Now, let me ask you, if some pagan sailors could handle their fear that way, how many more resources do you and I have? Because, you know they never read the Gospel of Matthew, when the religious leaders came to Jesus and said "do a miracle to prove who you really are." And Jesus says, "The only sign I'll give you is the sign of Jonah. (**Matthew 12:40-41**) "*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth...and now something greater than Jonah is here.*"

What is Jesus saying? He is saying there is only one storm that can really take you out. Only one. There's only one storm that can really sink you. And that is at the end of your life, when you look at all the things you've done, how are you going to stand before God knowing what every person knows down deep...that we're guilty? That we don't measure up? Jesus says, "I took the ultimate storm. I'm the ultimate Jonah. I went under, not an ocean of water, I went under an ocean of punishment and justice. I went under the only storm that could ever, ever take you out, and as a result, you will have calm."

If Jesus Christ, the ultimate Jonah, has taken out the only storm that can really, really, really clobber me, then, and only then, I'm safe because **1 John 4:18** says, "... *perfect love drives out fear...*" If I know I'm loved because he did that for me, then and only then can I get rid of my fear. I cannot get rid of fear by building higher walls – drones don't care about your walls. I cannot get rid of fear by better insurance policies – diseases don't care about your insurance. I cannot get rid of fear by amassing bigger retirement portfolios – recessions don't care about your pension fund. I cannot get rid of fear like that. I have to know that the One who made the universe and the One who is all powerful loves me, and the only way I know that is if I know Jesus is the ultimate Jonah, the willing sacrifice, who said, "I'll die for you."

Now, let me finish like this. I am aware that for certain folks, it would be very easy to respond to this message like this, "Okay, I've got it. In fact, I know this stuff. I come to Southwest Family fairly often. Anthony is a little repetitious, so I've heard this before. I know the drill. You have to first of all stop living for material things. You need to live for Christ, but you have to be careful not to do it in a religious, works-righteousness way. You have to understand what the gospel is. Check! That's how I deal with fear."

Well, yes. But here's the thing, be careful. It's not quite that easy, and here's why. I wrote this sermon – ok? – *and* I had a terrible week with fear. And I knew I was going to be preaching to people on how to deal with their fears – the topic is fairly clear from the text. But here's what I found. You can know it all. Obviously, I am the ultimate know-it-all! You can know all the right things. It's one thing to know; it's another thing to inhabit it.

And I had an experience this week that I was really looking forward to, I had been preparing for it for months, and actually, I felt like God had perfectly equipped me for this moment. I had written this document that was a masterpiece – I told Deanna, this could be my ticket. And then I got to the meeting and presented it and it went *south...hard!* I did not see it coming. To make matters worse, I left at 6:30 AM to drive to Dallas, endured this 5 hour massacre, and then had to drive back down 1-35 again. What a nasty day.

But beyond that, it left me in doubt about a core part of my being. All these negative scenarios and imaginary arguments running through my head. I spent the last several days doubting myself. Doubting my calling. I got a new theology book in the mail and I was like, "What's even the point?" Now, if you know me, that's rock bottom! But it threw me. And I did not see it coming. It was a storm. And it exposed some rats in the cellar.

Now, I know the gospel. I preach the gospel. I am not a hypocrite, I drink the same water I serve you. But I was amazed, to a humiliating degree, to what extent I have been getting a lot of my sense of worth and security out of my ability to fathom and impart...the gospel of Jesus Christ, ironically. Some of you will not be able to understand what I'm about to say, but it is possible to make an idol out of how well I know the gospel, rather than make my life about the gospel itself. I'm not even sure I understand that!

It's not that hard to become a Jonah. You know, Jesus says, "Build your house on the rock, not on the sand, because when the storms come, the house built on the sand will fall." I amen that. And you know what, I'm a realist, I always think my house is over on the rock...maybe a *little bit* on the sand. And then whenever a storm comes I find out it's *mainly* on the sand and only a little on the rock.

What are we supposed to do about that? I'll tell you what I have to do. It's kind of like this, anybody working out for the New Year? I'm in my longest continual fitness activity to date – Deanna is too – right before the end of the year I logged my 100th check-in at Gamp Gladiator. They literally gave me a cookie. But that represented 100 hours of self-initiated physical torture.

Just Thursday morning, I was outside in the parking lot at 5:00 AM running laps and lifting weights. Now, when I was done lifting those weights, did I feel stronger? Heck no! I felt like the weakest man on earth! My arms and legs were jelly. It hurt to walk for two days. I'm just starting to feel better, so that I can go back out tomorrow and feel weak again. But you know what I know – even if I don't feel like it most days? *I am* getting stronger. I'm lifting heavier weights than I was. I can do more than I used to.

Those of you who work out, you understand this. As you're getting stronger physically, you feel like you're getting weaker, but after it's all over, you *are* stronger. And what is your reward? Do they let you use lighter weights? No! My trainer is on me about *increasing* the weight. Woman, these are killing me!

Right now, if you read the scriptures, if you pray day and night, you talk to Jesus until his love gets sort of real to you, if you commit to a group of Christians to hold you accountable, if you come here Sunday after Sunday to let me pester you over and over, if you go to your heart and say, "Do you know what? You thought you trusted in God; turns out you don't. But let's start again." If you do all these things, as many of you are doing them right now, and you do them in the sun and you do them in the storm...you don't feel like you're getting stronger, but you are. You're moving your house a *little bit* more over on the rock and a little bit less on the sand.

You can't just know it, you've got to inhabit it. And that's why I wanted to end today by receiving communion with my spiritual family. Because I don't know what your week was like, but I need a tangible reminder of where my security rests. I need to hold it in my hand and taste it on my tongue. This bread represents Jesus' body broken for us. This cup represents his blood poured out for us. This is the true Jonah. He went into the storm...he went under the waves...so that we could have the calm. So that we could face fear and find faith.

Let's pray...