



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, *Rector*

How Jonah Lost and Found His Soul

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 22, 2014
The Second Sunday After Pentecost—Based on Matthew 10:24-39*

In *The Book of Jonah*, novelist Joshua Feldman spins an engaging tale about losing one's soul—in this case, his. As the book begins, Jonah, the protagonist with obvious overtones of the Biblical character, is on top of the world. Beautifully educated, already compensated well, he is on the fast track to partnership in one of the leading law firms in New York City, all but certainly assuring him great financial success. To top it off, he has a gorgeous brilliant fiancée on a similar path to substantial success. The world is his oyster. The fact that he has a girlfriend on the side is admittedly complicating, but he plans to end that relationship any day now—again. They have stopped and started many times over the last ten years.

Although culturally Jewish, Jonah's real religion is the pursuit of having it all. If his path to winning the big prizes is a ruthless law practice in which he often finds himself on the side of the bad guy, then so be it. Business is business. He rarely thinks of faith or religion, certainly not as something that he would choose to engage in a personal way—until one day on the subway, when he meets a Hasidic man who begins to talk to him and then strangely warns him, "You can't hide on the subway from the Lord's outstretched hand any more than Jonah could hide on the seas. Wouldn't you rather be counted among the righteous when the arrogant are washed away?" Dismissive of the man as a religious nut and, yet, somehow unable to shake this bizarre encounter, later the same evening at a party he has a mind-blowing vision that shatters his world. Suddenly he is a man who is incapable of lying, one whose moral compromises, both personal and business, are overwhelming and unable to be ignored, a man who indeed has seen his languishing soul laid out before him and has no idea about what he is to do.

Jesus said, "Don't be afraid of those who may kill your body; instead fear those who may kill your soul." The modern day Jonah in Feldman's novel has met a kind of death much worse than physical death. You will have to read the book to learn what happens to him in this fable about one who has to crash before he can recover the moral compass of his life. But you don't have to read it to get my point: In my heart I believe that in one way or another we already know this story deep down. It pierces some of our cherished illusions about how life is to be lived and how genuine meaning is derived. Jesus, not surprisingly, was right: The real danger is less what can be done to us physically than what slowly but surely destroys our souls, rendering us mere shells of what God is creating us to be. We are sometimes fearful to even ask ourselves about the soul value of our lives, so frantic and busy we are in doing the next right thing, taking the path that our culture defines as the most successful or the most financially rewarding. We do this not because we are bad people but because we are fearful—fearful of not having enough, being enough, doing enough, unable to realize that what matters most is not how much we have but the way in which we live.

To be clear, my words this morning are not a diatribe against the practice of law or the realities of business or of money in general for that matter. Once after having heard me preach in a similar vein, someone came charging up to me following the service—which by the way is never a great sign, particularly if he/she is red in the face, as this person was. He said, "If all of us start thinking about the 'soul' value of our jobs and begin to follow wherever that takes us, exactly who is going to support this church? Are you saying that all of us should quit our jobs and become priests?" The latter question was easy to answer: Becoming a priest is not an automatic path to finding one's soul. Trust me on this. I have known some priests, who a long time ago lost their souls, some

believing every second as it occurred that they were doing it for God. And beyond that, I have had my own moments of knowing what it feels like to be losing one's soul. No "holy" group is guaranteed anything except the truth that every person has to be vigilantly aware of what truly matters in his or her life. The first question was a little harder: Who indeed will support the church if everyone chooses to follow the soul journey? Flippantly my first thought was: prepayment; give lots before you run off to seminary! Happily I chose to be more pastoral and admitted that I didn't know the answer and acknowledged that worrying about money for the church is one of the pitfalls that can take the soul of someone like me. It is not easy to follow Jesus, who seemed to question the power that money has in the world and in our lives, while simultaneously running an organization, a good one with a meaningful presence and purpose, that depends upon money to continue.

But then Jesus never said any of this business would be easy. What he said was, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." This saying is so enigmatic and overwhelming that we have relegated it either to religious cross-stitching—of which I never desire to have another piece—or to thoughts about the next life, eternal life, life that comes at the end of this one. In this passage, Jesus is talking about this life, which by the way is the only life we know. In Feldman's novel, Jonah, who has everything the world has to give, has lost his life now. That is the dilemma; what comes next for him is really not the issue. Spending the whole of our religious life pondering about whether we will get into heaven or avoid hell at some distant point in the future is to squander the joyous life to which we are called now. Christian evangelicalism has so permeated our religious thinking that we apply notions of "this life" versus "next life" to every issue, even though such thinking was never the focus of Jesus and is, in fact, a distraction.

There are no magic or instant answers to living a soulful life, a life that understands when enough is truly enough, a life which acknowledges that people are always more important than doctrines, a life that genuinely understands that life itself is short and that every moment is precious and the possible occasion for an encounter with God. The only thing of which I am sure is that life without a soul is worse than no life at all. We were created, the church has long claimed and I believe with all my heart, to be in communion with God; and the great mystery of spirituality is that in finding our soul, we find God.

Nothing less than that, Jesus said, is at stake.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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