

Discipline

Dn. Jacob Bush August 9, 2020

A number of years ago I read a book by Robert Wicks entitled, "Riding the Dragon." Despite its ominous title, the book was actually quite uplifting. And no, it was not a prophetic message concerning astronauts Bob and Doug and their journey to and from the International Space Station. It tells of how to deal with difficult times in your life. One passage I remember talks about being "in the basement" and I'm paraphrasing "as long as you are in the basement you might as well look around." Do not think of the "basement" like we think of where it is dry, and there is light, and a set of stairs that we can climb whenever we want. Think of it more like a hole without a staircase and not well lit, but still light enough that one can still see. The basement being a term Wicks uses to describe a time of difficulty. Basically, the point is that there is much to be learned while we are "in the basement." We can actually see things more clearly, such as the reasons we are in the basement in the first place.

So often in our lives we end up in the basement. We go through difficult times. Sometimes it is because we were stupid and sinned. Sometimes we are not directly at fault, which is not to say we should not be subject to difficulty, being human beings. But in both cases, God uses difficult times to refine us, and to purify us as gold is refined in fire. Listen to the words of the Apostle Peter in I Peter 1:6, 7 regarding these trials. "...Now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

We are going through a trial right now with the coronavirus. With all of the media bombardment concerning the coronavirus I am sure you are sick of hearing about it. I know that I am sick of hearing about it. And with so-called "experts" making claims regarding how long we will be dealing with this virus it can be depressing. It can keep dragging us back to the basement. But remember the truth, nothing that happens takes God by surprise, and ultimately God is in charge, not the virus, not the media, not the government, but God alone is in control and has our good in mind. He is trustworthy and true. As Jonah declared, "Salvation comes from the Lord." (Jonah 2:10)

Jonah was a prophet that went through a "basement" experience. His was due to his own sin. Jonah was a man that loved the Lord, and loved His people, Israel, but was not very fond of the wicked nations around Israel. In chapter 1 God told Jonah to, "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." (Jonah 1:2) We are not told in Jonah what their sin was whether specific or just general wickedness. However, according to Veggie-tales they liked to steal, cheat and worst of all, they liked to slap people with fishes. Nineveh was a city of Assyria on the Tigris river. Assyria and Israel were not the closest of friends, in fact Assyria was the enemy of Israel. So, when God told Jonah to go to Nineveh Jonah was like, what are you nuts? No way! I am not going to Nineveh! They are wicked, they deserve to be destroyed not forgiven. Do you know what I am going to do? I am going to run away. So that is what Jonah did. He sinned against the Lord by disobeying the

Lord's command to go to Nineveh and instead sailed to Tarshish. Many scholars believe that Tarshish was in modern day Spain way on the other side of the known world from where Nineveh was.

What happened? Jonah found out that Psalm 139:7,8 is true. "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there." Jonah ran away, but he could not escape from God. While on his way to Tarshish God sent a storm to churn up the Mediterranean Sea to the point that it looked like the ship he was on would break up and sink. The men he was with were terrified and each prayed to his own god. But that did not calm the storm. They implored Jonah to pray to God. They cast lots to see who was to blame and the lot fell on Jonah. They asked Jonah about himself and about the storm. Jonah confessed that he worships "the Lord the God of heaven who made the sea and the land." (Jonah 1:9) He then tells them to throw him overboard and then the sea will become calm. Once they do throw him overboard, the sea calms down, they recognize that God was in control of the storm and the calming thereof, and they worship Him. There was a bad situation that led to some good.

But God is not done disciplining Jonah yet. He sends a "great fish" to come and swallow Jonah. This is Jonah's "basement." He is in this fish as part of the Lord's compassion towards him and Nineveh and also part of the Lord's discipline. Think of super-nanny. That English nanny that goes around to help parents deal with their unruly children. She says things like, "the pair of you need to be united in the discipline of your children. When they act like this, put them on the naughty spot." Jonah disobeyed the Lord by running away, and the Lord disciplined Jonah by putting him in the "naughty fish."

One passage we need to keep in mind here is Hebrews 12:5-11 "And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'my son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.'" That is one of Solomon's proverbs in fact it is Proverbs 3:11, 12.

Verse 7,

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

As an aside, I encourage everyone to understand the connection between the Old and New Testaments. If we are to learn the most we can from Scripture, we really need to hear from the whole Scriptural witness. Back in the 80s Fr. Amend compared Scripture to a house. If

I may restate what he said, every house needs three things: walls, a roof, and a foundation. If the house is missing any of those it will not be a house, at least not for very long. The foundation of course is Jesus Christ (The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord). Think of the Old Testament as the walls, and the New Testament as the roof. We cannot have just walls or just a roof, we need both.

Laughter can be good too during tough times. I do not know that Jonah did any of that, and discipline is not funny, but I find laughter soothing sometimes and it can help us to stay positive. In fact, a few years ago when my dad was passing away, our family was sitting in the ICU waiting room, and Fr. Ward was there too. The doctor came into the room, and I do not remember anymore what he said. But Fr. Ward said, "That didn't seem relevant." And my Uncle Joe, with a straight face just said, "It didn't have anything to do with the situation Fr. Ward, don't use your big words with me." And we just started laughing hysterically, and poor Fr. Ward just looked like he was not sure what to say. I am not sure he understood at first that Uncle Joe was joking.

Yes, laughter can help us cope, but the account of Jonah can teach us other things we can do to endure discipline. While Jonah was in the fish, he prayed the prayer that we find in Jonah 2. "From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said, 'In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.'"

Imagine being thrown into the sea during a storm. Waves crashing all around you, no visible way of rescue from the sea. That is what Jonah experiences. He is certain that he is going to die because of his sin. Actually, that is the same predicament that those in Nineveh were in. Their sin would result in their death except that they had no idea. They were ignorant of their own wickedness, and so they did not know they needed rescuing.

I will bet that Jonah never thought of them being in that situation until that moment. His "basement" experience enabled him to have greater clarity about the need of those in Nineveh. That is the first good thing to come from such experiences. We can see things more clearly when we submit to the Lord's discipline.

Verse 3, "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." Jonah recognizes that this entire event is God orchestrated. God used the sailors to toss Jonah overboard. The currents, waves, and breakers all belong to God. God is in control. That is good thing number 2, recognition that God is ultimately in control of every situation and will use it for our good and His glory.

Verse 4, "I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.' The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever." Humbleness is good thing number 3. As human beings we are frail. We can succumb to many things, yet that should get us to focus on God. "I lift my eyes up to the hills. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:1) When we find ourselves in difficult situations to whom do we turn? Do

we keep our eyes on the problem as though we have the power to help ourselves? Or do we keep our eyes on God and seek Him, who alone can save us?

Continuing verse 6,

But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord.

Adoration, praise, and worship is what we find in these verses. Notice that it was when Jonah was most in need that he remembered the Lord and prayed to him. Sometimes it takes a trying time to get us to remember the Lord and pray to Him. Some people “cling to worthless idols” such as sports, money, routine, relationships with other people. Nothing wrong with those things unless they take the place of God in our lives. But it is often the case that when tough times come and we do not have all of those things, we suddenly remember the Lord. God uses times of trial to remind us to keep Him first in our lives. He is reminding us to keep our priorities straight.

Being in the fish afforded Jonah the opportunity to reflect on his decisions. He could look deeper into who he was and who God is. He could repent of his evil, disobedient attitude, his pride in his heritage as an Israelite leading to his hatred for those in Nineveh who did not know God. He could get his priorities straight. Jonah praises God for saving his life when he needed Him the most.

As a result of Jonah being in the fish, a whole city was spared God’s wrath. Jonah did go to Nineveh and as a result of the word which God gave him to preach, “The Ninevites believed God,” (Jonah 3:5) and “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.” (Jonah 3:10)

We are going through a tough time now. No matter how difficult things get, we still have a lot to be thankful to God for. God has been merciful with us during this “unprecedented” time. Things could be a lot worse. Can such times as these be scary and nerve-wracking? Yes. I am sure that when Jonah was in the Mediterranean, he was nervous and scared. Peter panicked when he took his eyes off of Jesus and focused on the wind instead and started sinking in the Sea of Galilee. What did Peter do? He cried out to Jesus, “Lord, save me!” We need to focus on Jesus, and not on the difficulties.

I remember this one scene in the movie, “Patch Adams.” Patch is in the mental institution and one of the other patients Arthur Mendelson is trying to get Patch to tell him how many fingers he is holding up. Patch keeps looking at the fingers and Arthur says, “your focusing on the problem. When you focus on the problem, you can’t see the solution.”

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.” The solution is Jesus. Jesus certainly

submitted himself to God by dying on the cross in our place, for our sins. When he was on the cross, he kept his focus on the Father. Good came from the cross, salvation for all who put their trust in Him, and Jesus rose from the dead, breaking the power of sin and death.

I know that Fr. Ward has addressed all of these things with regard to the coronavirus, so what I am saying here is nothing new. But I believe it needs to be stated again because if you are like me, you forget. I have a mind like a sieve these days. I have reached a point where I go into a room to do something and by the time I get there I forget why I went in there. So, I end up turning around a few times, like a dog chasing its tail, trying to see if I can remember why I went into the room. I need to be reminded of things.

Also, there is so much negativity out there. The media reports, the government briefings, the stuff we see on social media is so negative. I really believe that God wants us to see things differently than the rest of the world. We cannot look like them. That means we cannot be negative. Does that mean we will never get sick? Does that mean we will never have “basement” experiences? No, we are still human and still subject to illnesses and various other things. But it does mean that when we go through difficulty, we should keep our chin up. Allow God to work through it. Do not fight the Lord’s discipline, rather embrace it.

We need to recognize that this time is a time of discipline. That is the key. Put Hebrews 12:7 into practice, “Endure hardship and discipline; God is treating you as sons.” If we submit ourselves to God’s discipline, realize that God is ultimately in control, remain humble, continue to seek Him, worship Him, and never focus on the difficulty but rather keep our focus on Jesus, good can come out of the bad situation. We do not know how many people can be encouraged by seeing God at work in our lives. We do not know how many people might put their trust in Jesus Christ because they see the fruit of our lives. So, take courage! Because He lives, we can face tomorrow. We can face uncertain days because He lives!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!