

“The Sign of Jonah”  
 Sermon for 6 January 2019  
 Texts Matthew 12:38-42 & Romans 6:3-4

What does Jonah have to do with the risen and glorious Lord Jesus?! Is it something Jesus said? I purpose to begin the new year with a look at our future, our ultimate future as in heavenly destiny and heavenly condition. Let begin with seeing our spiritual transformation as a change of state.

Yes, a change of state—something as common as putting the kettle on for tea. Water turns to steam. When this happen there is a tremendous release of energy which can be harnessed into steam power and drive huge ships, or, in yesteryear, steam engines on the railway system. There's independence from wind at sea and the capacity to haul tons of freight long distances once roadbeds are built and bridges. Now once you've seen this conversion of water to steam, you are not likely to forget it. And the images of it are embedded in your imagination—and it can surface in dreams or visions. In a hilarious dream sequence, I found myself cruising down Rt. 202, late in the day in a go-cart. My cart had no lights, I headed home and the local police pulled me over. “Tell you what,” they said, loading my go-cart in the back of their pick-up truck, “why don't we just give you a safe ride home.” What great officers! Anyway, back to steam. I would wager that if you ever were scalded by steam. you never forgot that experience either.

Furthermore, frozen water melts and we can relate that change of state to other natural events such as mountains melting into rivers of hot lava and flowing in glowing streams down hill—sometimes swallowing forests and villages. The recent Hawaiian eruptions, or Mt. Etna's fireworks, in real time, come to mind. Once you've seen it you cannot un-see it! *The imagery, and the events are etched into your memory* and lie there available for recall, or for use in art work etc. Experience is how we are tooled up for self-expression—we pick up stories as we learn.

Now Romans 6:3-4 references a different kind of change of state:

**“Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”**

Paul is addressing a spiritual reality here, a change of state which occurs through a release of power—Paul calls it **the glory of the Father**. It is the power that raised Jesus from the dead and, as it works in our lives, it also raises us to *spiritual life* from *spiritual death*—which is a really big deal. **By the power of the glory of God** you and I are saved, and we walk henceforth in newness of life. Baptism signifies this change of state for us just as it did for the early church. By analogy we might describe the glory of the Father as the heat/energy applied to our bodies/the kettle, to bring about the change of state—it raised Jesus, it raises us to new life.

I learned something new about a favorite painting of mine which hangs in my office. It is part of carved triptych painted by Matthias Grunewald in the late fifteen century for the chapel of a hospital in Isenheim, Germany. A facility build as part of a monastery to treat those

suffering from ergotism—a disease contracted from eating spoiled wheat. Death from Ergotism was gruesome [1], death was inevitable and the last stages appear to have been frequented by demonic visitation. Ergotism is also known as St' Anthony's fire. I incorrectly believed that the painting was executed for a leper's colony off Italy—it was not.

And, little did I know, that there was a second view behind this very dark, agonized crucifixion scene—situated directly behind the first view. [2]The presenting painting (altarpiece) is rich with religious symbolism: John the Baptist, and the lamb of God are at Jesus' left—Mary Magdalene, a swooning Mary and John the beloved disciple is depicted supporting her. The backdrop of the first view is very dark, foreboding. Death and Darkness covered Life and glorious light physically. However, imagine my wonder and surprise when I discovered that there *behind this* was a depiction, in glorious and triumphant terms of the resurrection! [3] The promise of compassion was trumped by something glorious—not just release from suffering and pain, but the attainment of complete wholeness, joy and bliss of the life to come! **A glimpse forward of our coming, eternal condition!** Resurrection glory artistically depicted! But I wouldn't have known except that someone opened it up to me—revealed it, as it were. THEN I went through a change of state! Everything was transformed as power was released.

So now you are ready for yet another journey from darkness and death to new life and resurrection. What we have here [4] is the Catacomb of St. Peter and Marcellinus, the from entrance in Rome of a 2nd and 3rd century mortuary—a place of burial for the faithful dead. Inside where, most likely, funerals were performed, there is a “cubiculum,” a domed room with decorative/religious art. Here's a closer look at the ceiling [6] and then an even closer look at the central painting: “The Good Shepherd,” who is surrounded by his sheep. [7] And all around this central frame, marked off by a red circle, is a cycle of paintings from the Jonah story [8]—four of at least seven major episodes *from the Jonah cycle* have been rendered. Now because, one of the scenes is badly damaged—I have selected a similar presentation from another catacomb—where this sequence is better preserved. [9]

As I said, there is a purpose from this *particular* art work in this *particular* setting which I want to set before you. Namely, that the sign of Jonah was singled by Jesus (!) when he declared (in Matt. 12:38-41): **No sign shall be given this evil and adulterous generation except the sign of Jonah**—and that sign was one of resurrection. Jesus likened his own stay of three days in the tomb to the days Jonah spent in the sea monster— fashioned to deliver him from death when he repented and cried out of salvation. At the time Jesus singled out Jonah, he also asserted that he was a better preacher than Jonah (who converted a whole civilization/city and that he was wider than Solomon—and the unbelieving Jews were, frankly, really missing out!

The early church paid particular attention (as these paintings signify) to this saying, it appears. Jesus' saying was a pivotal one—hugely important to Jesus, to his audience, and through them to us! That is why the Jonah cycle is found under the funereal domes in many of the catacombs. The dead are regarded as “Jonah's,” awaiting their translation to new life in Paradise. Just as Jonah was delivered from death to life when the sea monster, created to rescue him, [10] vomited him up on dry land, alive! So Jesus would bring the saints home to himself. A change of state indeed. And Jonah is depicted on the ceiling for all the grieving to see and to be encouraged by as they grieved—look what lies ahead!.

There is no missing the further point: Christian baptism celebrates a burial *into the death of Christ* (Romans 6:3) which simultaneously proclaims the hope of new life. *Resurrection life is symbolized* as the candidate is raised from the baptismal waters.

As well, baptism is the point of entry into the Christian walk,  
or body life/membership now and into heaven later.

Our dead lie in “repose,” as if “sleeping,” awaiting the day of their resurrection, when **in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye**, body and soul are to be reunited and ushered into eternal life as a whole, fully actualized [11] (and glorified!) [12] human being. . . to be with Jesus there.

There are several features in the painting that are time sensitive. For instance, we note that Jonah is depicted as naked when he is swallowed up by the monster (rescued from death by drowning) and, again, naked when he is deposited on dry land. WHY? In the 3rd century practice, baptismal candidates were baptized naked! They only wore their baptismal robe to the baptistry, or river site. But it is the nude figure in the final frame that is most intriguing. Doubly so. Jonah seems depicted as Endymion, the Roman god enamored with the moon goddess, Selene. What is a naked Roman god doing *in the Jonah narrative*?! Well, it is critical to note that this Jonah is not Endymion at all. This is definitely Jonah depicted as Endymion in an eternal setting, that is Paradise in which he like Adam might appropriately appear naked! The setting determines their attire! At first glance, the last frame looks like a Roman god under a vine on a hillside. That is a mistaken interpretation, *what the artist painted was Jonah in Paradise*. Jonah alive and well in the eternal realm—where we are headed!—which is the promise of the resurrection in material, yet supernaturalized imagery. The resemblance to Adam is absolutely intentional—theologically, or creedally necessary.

The artist is depicting things unseen in terms of what is seen, and then translated into spiritual terms.

There are *other* resurrection narratives in pictorial form such as murals and ceiling paintings found in other archeological sites, Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac being one; but the Jonah cycle is the most common story. And everyone who observed these paintings at the repeated funerals of their loved ones would get the intended message: we, Christians, die but we die *in the sure hope* of our resurrection from the dead, look at what’s above us! And certain scriptures support our position strongly.

Hear John 5:24-29 which is a highly aural text—it focuses on what is heard. As a matter of interest please notice the other sensory/mental channels through which each writer makes his appeal to our minds:

**24 “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life. 25 Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. 26 For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; 27 and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is [son of man] the Son of Man. 28 Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, 29 and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.**

And, Rev. 20:11-13 this writing is highly visual—what John “sees” is recorded:

**Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose [face] presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and [scrolls] books were opened; and another [scroll] book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the [scrolls] books, according to their deeds. 13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds.**

Paul further notes in Acts 24:14-16 which is a more faith-based:

**14 But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve [the ancestral God] the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets; 15 having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. 16 In view of this, I also [practice myself] do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men.**

I supply these three varied scriptures, in addition to Matthew 12:38-41 (alluded to above) as textual sources for the interpretation of the Jonah cycle as painted in the catacombs. We depend on these scriptures not merely as written for us, but understand that they were thoroughly expounded and explained *in the day* when Christian funerals were taking place in Rome in the catacombs and the art work was fresh. And I submit to you that once you have seen it, once you have grasped the connection between the art and the Scripture, you will never forget it.

What does Jonah have to do with the risen and glorious Lord Jesus?

It turns out, quite a lot. He is a prefigurement of the risen Christ and he is a compelling link between the first Adam (who lost it all) and the Second Adam (who won it all back). The artist depicts for us our destination (heaven) and our condition (like Jesus, possessing a divine nature—imparted to us upon repenting believing).

Clearly, we like the Ninevites have a hope of deliverance—if we will turn to God.

Is it something Jesus said?

Again, it's affirmative. Wiser than Solomon, and a greater preacher than Jonah, Jesus made it crystal clear: someone far more important than either has appeared in his coming.

**And at the judgment**, the men of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba **will rise up** and reproach those who would not repent when they had opportunity.

So what is our future?

Our future is very bright if we turn in repentance and receive our Lord and King on his terms for his terms” **repent and believe**. So, if you have not experienced the change of state that comes from confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, I must ask, “What is the hold up?” May many choose this day to enter in!

**Amen.**