

In the Book of Jonah, God dispatches the prophet to the city of Nineveh. God charges him: "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it." God is instructing Jonah to get involved. Jonah's response? He attempts to escape. He wants nothing to do with the people of Nineveh, so he flees. This a dramatic story about the sea, a ship, and a great fish, and most of all about a fellow Jew who ran away from his responsibility, ran away from God, and just wanted to be left alone. Fortunately, with the passage of time Jonah had a change of heart and eventually he went to Nineveh where the people were gained repentance.

The biblical text tells us that Jonah was in the whale (literally, dag gadol, "a big fish") for three days (Jonah 2:1). Three days in the Torah means a long time, but not too long a time, unless you have no food. For example in I Samuel 30:12, "he had eaten no food and drunk no water for three days and three nights." Abraham walked for three days before he tied Isaac to the altar (Genesis 22:4), the Israelites prepared for three days to receive the Torah (Exodus 19:11), and Queen Esther (4:16) waited and fasted for three days to get up her courage before she went to her husband the king unannounced. In this situation, three days can seem like an eternity.

What would you do if you had three days with no water, no food, no Internet, no place to go, and no one to see? (I imagine we're all feeling a bit hollow inside right now, and we would only be in the afternoon of Day One.) The text does not tell us how Jonah managed his three-day ordeal in the "big fish." We can only imagine, and reflect, how would any of us manage with three days and three nights of fasting and isolation?

Now, imagine for a few moments that you are Jonah. Go ahead, close your eyes. You are in a dark space, all alone. How are you sitting -- or standing -- or lying down? Are you scared? Are you praying? I guess you will be thinking about the life you have lived so far. Your friends, your family, your loved ones -- past and present. You wonder about the future. You have lost control. Does God have new plans for you? What are you willing to do to bring back meaning and hope into your life? Remember, for three days and nights you are deprived of water and food, of the daily requirements of nourishment and cleanliness. You ache, you are tired, you just want to sleep. How frail we find our own bodies. How easy it is to bring us down. How easy it is at this moment to imagine the fear of being locked in a cold jail cell, alone. How the deprivations of water or food can seem excruciating. Yet... Many people live that life every day. They did not choose this life-style.

It was simply imposed: They suffer pain and fear and indignities that, in this hour, you and I can just begin to imagine. I spend a lot of time in Africa in places where extreme poverty, violence, conflict, disease and rape are commonplace. Many days, people go for long stretches without food and sometimes even without water. Children as well as adults experience the deprivation that Jonah suffered every day of their lives.

By imagining you are Jonah, you can imagine that these young people are our brothers and sisters. In our minds, we can feel their loss, their hunger, their aches. We can begin to experience what it means to be beaten, to live with pain, to lose one's dignity.

Imagine some more that you are Jonah. With time to think, Jonah was forced to confront his fears, his loneliness, his mistakes, and his God. Today we are Jonah, doing exactly the same thing during our meditations, our reflections and our prayers.

In chapter 2, verse two, Jonah prays to "the Lord his God from the belly of the fish." His prayer is heartfelt and sincere. Fearing for his life, conflicted and alone, Jonah found his God and his purpose. Eventually, he is released from the fish. He resolves to fulfill his prophetic mission and he does just that.

What about you? What is your purpose? How will you make the year ahead a more meaningful one for you?

Each of us experiences many fears – we doubt ourselves and are afraid of the unknown. Maybe we just want to be left alone. But today's question is: what do you do with these feelings? Do you, like Jonah did initially, allow fear to separate yourself from others, to say “that's not my problem; I am not my brother's keeper?” Or do you-- like Jonah after his three days in the big fish -- allow your fear to illuminate your vulnerabilities and inspire you to take action to do good things, to live a life of purpose?

This is our chance. Yours and mine. In a few hours, after Ne'ilah, we will have emerged from our fasting, our isolation, our day of prayer. Can we make change? Can we live differently, better? Will we?

Small steps are what it takes. A new beginning. A change in perspective. A deeper sense of connectedness with the world around you. My Yoga teacher always ends her session with the prayer, “I honor the place in you that is the same as me.” Similarly, I recently returned from Zimbabwe where I learned the Shona language greeting for early in the day. It is a ritualistic exchange -- not a simple Hello as it would be in English. In Shona, the first person says Good morning, how did you sleep? And the other person answers, I slept well if you slept

well. Then the second person begins, Good morning, how did you sleep? And again, I slept well, if you slept well.

I slept well, only if you slept well. My well-being is dependent on yours. I honor the place in you that is the same in me. We may be strangers, but we are connected, dependent on each other. We cannot cut ourselves off to live in isolation and still survive. Like Jonah after the fish, we must emerge from that isolation and respond to the needs we see around us..”

So imagine a while longer that you are Jonah. In a short while, you will leave behind the fasting and deprivation of today's ordeal. You are being called to a mission, a purpose. You resolve to start each day differently. I slept well if you slept well. I ate well if you ate well. My life has meaning if your life has meaning. I am me because of you. My life depends on yours. We are one body, one humanity. We are all Jonah.