

In the Belly of the Beast

Why we had a Whale of a time at the youth leaders' retreat

by Dimitra Chronopoulos, Joanna Panagiotakakos, Lia Tsotsos

At a Metropolis-organized retreat for Sunday school teachers and youth workers on March 21, speakers Presvytera Hara Avgeropoulou and Presvytera Stamatia Hatzis asked the audience this question: **How would you describe your experience as a Sunday school teacher/youth worker?** Signs posted in the four corners of the room read:

Lost Sheep

**the Archangel
Gabriel**

**the Three
Hierarchs**

**Jonah and the
Whale**

We were asked to stand next to the sign that best described our answer.

We all found ourselves standing with Jonah and the Whale. Only one other person stood there with us. Most of the audience, including two of the priests, identified with the Lost Sheep (but that may have had as much to do with the sign's proximity to the food table as its content). There was a small group of Hierarchs, and only three Archangels.

Why did we identify with Jonah? One of us felt overwhelmed, insignificant and a little trapped; another felt like she was drowning; and the third felt like she wasn't necessarily qualified to be educating our youth and didn't know how to deal with the enormity of the challenge.

The fourth person in our group, Chris, had a much more optimistic outlook. "We are in the belly of the beast," he said, and even though things look grim, there will be an end. There is hope. Like Jonah, we will eventually emerge and prevail.

As we talked, it occurred to all of us that we didn't really know the story of Jonah and the whale. Yes, Jonah was trapped in the belly of a whale for three days. But why? Who *was* Jonah and how did he get into such an awkward and unusual position?

Jonah was a prophet, and the author of a (very short) book in the Old Testament. Jonah was also a coward, and a bit spiteful. God commanded him to go and teach in the city of Nineveh, but Jonah did not obey. He didn't believe the Ninevites deserved God's mercy

continued from page 6

and love. Instead, he got on a ship bound for a different destination and hid in the hold. When bad weather threatened the ship and Jonah confessed that he was a servant of the Lord and “fleeing from the presence of the Lord” (Jonah 1:11), he offered to jump overboard to spare the ship. And THAT’S how Jonah ended up in the belly of a large sea creature (that the Lord commanded to swallow him), praying for forgiveness and deliverance.

We identified with the literal aspects of the story (water, fear, discomfort), but our friend Chris looked ahead to the end result and larger meaning. When Jonah was finally released, he did what God had originally asked him to do, and the Ninevites did indeed repent and believe. The notes in our Orthodox study bible tell us that Jonah’s three-day stay in the belly of the whale is a figure—a symbol or sign—of the Lord’s death and resurrection. Just as Jonah’s deliverance made possible the repentance and salvation of the Ninevites, so God’s crucifixion and resurrection make possible our salvation. We, too, will be delivered. Indeed, we have been delivered already.

The story of Jonah and the whale is read in its entirety during the liturgy on Holy Saturday morning, so it is particularly fitting that we have had the chance to reflect on this story during Lent. **We have been reminded, above all, to keep the big picture in mind.** No matter how overwhelmed or hopeless we may feel, or how little “progress” we may appear, in our own eyes, to be making, God is always with us and God is in charge. Our job is to be patient, pray for guidance, repent, and do whatever He puts before us to the best of our ability. ✕

Excerpts About Jonah

Jonah was contained in the bosom of the whale, but not held. Rather prefiguring You, suffering and given over to burial, he sprang out of the beast as from a chamber, shouting to the men on watch: “Falsely and in vain do you keep watch, for you have forsaken mercy.”

from the Canon for Holy Saturday evening

*I descended into the earth,
The bars of which are everlasting
barriers;
Yet let my life ascend from
corruption, O Lord, my God.
When my soul was failing from me,
I remembered the Lord.
My my prayer be brought to You,
into Your holy temple.
Those who follow vanity and lies
forsake their own mercy.
But with a voice of thanksgiving
and praise,
I will sacrifice to You.
As much as I vowed, I shall offer up
to You,
To You, the Lord of Deliverance.*

from Jonah’s prayer (Jonah 2:7–10)

What else can we learn from the story of Jonah and the whale? See The Orthodox Study Bible, pp. 1020–1023. Bibles are available from the bookstore on Sundays after church.