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# Luther, Jonah, and the Leap of Faith

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Old advice cautions us, "Look before you leap." It's sound advice. My colleague, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., gives just that advice in an article on "innovative church services", underlining it in the title, "Before You Leap..." (*Canada Lutheran*, March 1993, 10). Sound advice! Nevertheless, it is balanced by another adage, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained"—which seems to be a rueful comment by one who did not dare to leap at a crucial moment.

Martin Luther understood all about leaping. Having challenged the church of his day, Luther was summoned to Worms, in 1521, and quickly placed under the ban of the empire and excommunicated (remaining an outlaw and a heretic for the rest of his life)—but not before he was threatened and pressured to recant. The recording secretary at the diet did not get to write down everything that was being said, but added later what had been Luther's concluding words: "Here I stand, I can do no other, God help me!" It did not appear that there was at that moment anyone else to help. Till then no major heretic had ever survived. What chance did Luther have? While Luther was rescued immediately after the diet through the efforts of his prince, for the rest of his life, Luther's existence was totally precarious, it was but one continuous act of faith. And that is why Luther's comments on the "leap of faith" are impressive and authentic.

He returns to this theme often, but most vividly in his 1526 *Commentary on the Book of Jonah* (*Luther's Works*, vol. 11). The plot of that Old Testament story (and it is a story rather than a historic account) is remarkable: called by God to prophecy to the wicked city of Niniveh, Jonah prefers

to escape and takes a ship to Tarshish. Of course, there is no way to escape from God, as Jonah learns quickly in the midst of a raging storm. Superstitious sailors, to discover the guilty person on board who has “caused” the storm, cast lots, and discover Jonah, who quickly enough confesses. In fact, it is the guilt-ridden Jonah himself who suggests to the sailors, “Take me and throw me into the sea; then the sea will be quiet for you...” (1:12). That is done very quickly, and Luther now comments:

Here... you must not view Jonah with his entire story in mind. Since we are familiar with the end of this narrative and know that he was delivered from it all, this phase of his life seems relatively insignificant to us and fails to move us very much. But you must visualize Jonah’s frame of mind and his dilemma. He does not see a spark of life left in him nor any hope of rescue; nothing but death, yes, death, death confronts him, and he must despair of life and surrender to death.

That is how it happened to Jonah, and that is how it happens to us. That is what life is often all about. Recalling such anguish, Luther continues his comments (or his reminiscences):

If it would please God to let us perceive life in the midst of death, or if He showed our soul its ultimate dwelling place and room in the manner and way in which it should maintain itself and reach its goal, death would not appear bitter, but it would seem like a leap across a shallow stream, with safe and solid banks on both sides. But as it is, God does not show any of that to us, and we must leap from the safe shore of life into this abyss without seeing or feeling a sure footing under us. We must leap, as it were, at random, merely trusting to God’s supporting and saving hand. That is the way Jonah is thrown out of the ship; he plunges into the sea, feels no bottom, is deserted by all creatures, and looks solely to God’s sustaining power (11:65–66).

Of course, this “sustaining power” is invisible. When the dark night of the soul engulfs us in total despair, faith is the only escape that we can look for, but how? Had Luther been a minor prophet, or a TV evangelist, he might have explained to us how *he* overcame his deep despair. But human despair is a subject matter for a private encounter with God and a private confession, not a public explanation. With tact and sensitivity, Luther immediately turns to Jonah:

What a battle must have raged in his heart! He, too, might well have sweat blood in his agony. He is compelled to contend simultaneously

against sin, against his own conscience and the feeling of his heart, against death, and against God's wrath. His soul must have been suspended by a silk thread over hell and eternal damnation (11:67).

How, then, did Jonah survive? How does anyone survive deep despair? Without anticipating the conclusion of the story, Luther acknowledges, indeed confesses: "Oh, a mighty work was wrought in his heart by the power of God to sustain and to preserve him!" (11:67). But not quickly, and certainly not immediately. Jonah, thrown from the ship into the raging sea, falls—and falls into the open jaws of a great fish. Imagine what will happen now!—

It must have been a horrifying sight to poor, lost, and dying Jonah when the [fish] opened its mouth wide and he beheld sharp teeth that stood upright all around like pointed pillars or beams and he peered down the wide cellar entrance to its belly.

If we ever saw the film *Jaws I* and the sequel *Jaws II*, we might identify with Jonah. Better yet, if we reflect, without dissimulation, and look into our own hearts, and remember, we will understand Jonah's anguish. In addition, I believe that Luther can enhance that understanding; he comments:

Is that being comforted in the hour of death? Is this the friendly glance in dying, that dying and death are not even sufficient? This is real faith, it seems to me; yes, a battle and struggle of faith. Here we find victory and triumph concealed in the greatest weakness. How mightily God here demonstrates the power of His Word and of faith! No creature is able to rob Him of it, nor even God's anger itself can work it harm, no matter how fiercely and furiously all may rage (11:67).

Of course, comfort, security, and peace are tempting—and pleasant. Who could survive if all of life consisted of storms only, and leap after leap! We understand Panurge, the hero of Francois Rabelais' great work, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, exclaiming in the midst of a raging storm: "Why, O Fates, did you not spin me a cabbage planter's lot? Few and signally blessed are those whom Jupiter has destined to be cabbage-planters. For they've always one foot on the ground and the other not far from it" (Penguin Books, 1955, p. 491).

Curiously, both those who leap in faith and those who live as cabbage planters, know the reality of fear. But courage is "fear that has said its prayers". Such has been the heritage of living Lutheranism at its best. The future, however, as always,

belongs to the younger generation. You will, therefore, either plant cabbages or believe, and say your prayers, and risk—and even leap. Every generation is confronted with such decisions.

Back in the seventh century Bede the Venerable recorded the speech of one of the counsellors of king Edwin, who has just been visited by Christian missionaries, and has heard their message:

“Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter’s day with your thanes and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it.” The other elders and counsellors of the king, under God’s guidance, gave similar advice (Penguin Books, 1970, p. 127).

And so shall we, even many centuries later. Otherwise, unless we leap in faith, and risk, and struggle, we are but cabbage planters, seeking a comfortable situation—and missing out on the challenge of salvation.