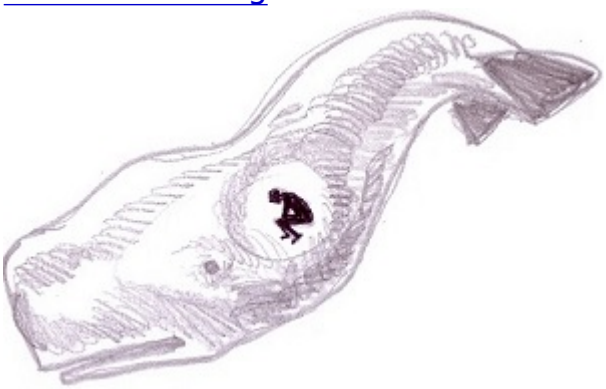
Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





by Pat Marrin

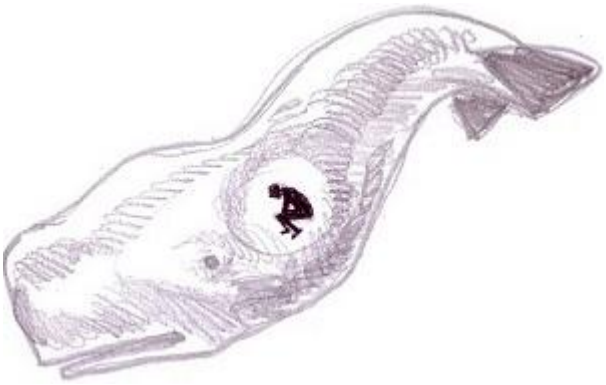
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“Consider it all joy, my brothers and sisters” (James 1:2).

Jas 1:1-11; Mark 8:11-13

A man is in a diner trying to decide if he wants a coffee refill. The waitress stands at the table with the carafe ready to pour, but he keeps withdrawing his cup, then offering it., then withdrawing it. She retreats, shaking her head.

St. James begins his letter to the churches with a similar image. God wants us to pray and is ready to bless us, but if we keep hesitating, doubt interrupts our faith and our prayer goes unanswered. Our relationship with God depends on two things: unwavering trust and an openness to show our faith in good works. Thus begins the debate that led Martin Luther to drop the Letter of James from the New Testament. For Luther, faith alone is the foundation of salvation. No act of virtue, sacrificial offering or church ritual can make us worthy of God’s pure gift.

The Pharisees approach Jesus to test his claim that he is from God. But they will not trust him unless he gives them some irrefutable sign. They want faith without faith, to believe but only after they are certain. They want a no-risk guarantee, which obviates the essence of real trust, that what you say and who you are is true because you say it is. Acceptance of Jesus’ teachings is secondary to accepting Jesus himself and entering into a relationship with him.

Jesus’ response to this deliberate conundrum is one of profound frustration. These sophisticated scholars and models of legal perfection are eager to test his theology, his grasp of the Scriptures and the Law, but they ignore his acts of love and deep compassion for the suffering of people. They focus on abstract questions but are blind to Jesus’ sincerity and empathy, his obvious holiness and his ease at instilling joy in ordinary people.

What seems ironic in this short passage from Mark is that though Jesus says he will not give them a sign, he is already preparing to reveal the messianic secret of the Paschal Mystery. This is the sign of Jonah. As Jonah went down into the belly of the whale, then reappeared, so Jesus will disappear in death and rise again to offer salvation. The Pharisees don't understand, so Jesus gives them a hint as he gets into the boat to cross the lake. This frequent passage with its storms and rescues has all along been a rehearsal for his death and resurrection, when he will walk triumphantly upon the waves of the deep.

What the Pharisees refuse to believe now will confound them when they see Jesus hanging on the cross. For the first time they will understand the Psalms, the prophecies of Isaiah and the meaning of Passover and the Exodus coming true before their eyes and minds. If not then, later, as reports say that Jesus is alive and appearing everywhere to his joyful followers. His critics will again have to decide whether to join them.

We may come to faith by study and reason or by experience and prayer, but the important thing is to believe in the person of Jesus, to call him by name and welcome him into your mind and heart. If he lives in you, you will be alive and bound for glory.