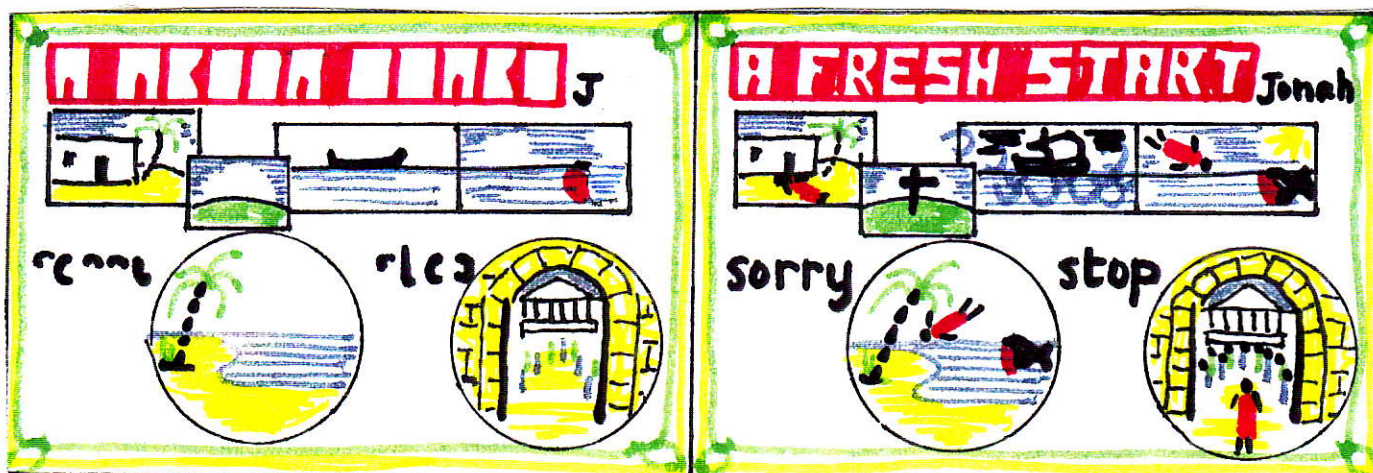


JONAH



Before I tell you this story, I want to ask you a question. Have you ever been asked to do something rather difficult, and thought "I'll just do something else first.....?" I know I have! This is a story from the Bible about a man whose name begins with J. It isn't Jesus. Who might it be? (*Ask for a few suggestions*). This man Jonah was a prophet of God. What is a prophet? A man who declares God's message to the people. One day he was having a sleep in the shade after dinner, (*snore, and draw him lying outside his house in picture 1, under the tree*). Suddenly he heard someone call his name. "That's strange," he thought. Somebody called his name again. He looked around but still he couldn't see anyone. "Hey! Maybe it's .. the Lord God! He jumped to his feet and stood up very straight (*do so*). "Yes, Lord?" And you know what? God spoke to him! Just like I am speaking to you. And God said "I have a very important job for you. I want you to go to the city called Nineveh. Tell the people there that unless they say sorry for the wrong things that they do, I will destroy their city because I am sad and angry about all the bad things that they do."

"Oh, no!" thought Jonah "Not Nineveh! Those people are bad enemies of Israel. As soon as they find out that I am a Jew, they will surely kill me! If I go and they say sorry to God, he will forgive them! And they don't deserve to be forgiven! They deserve to be punished. I'd love to see that city destroyed..... I know! I have an idea. First, I will have a little holiday, I need a break" So he started to walk. He walked to the port of Joppa, where all the ships were. (*Paint boat with mast and sail in picture 2*). There he asked for a ship going the opposite way to Nineveh! A nice Mediterranean cruise holiday. He went on board, paid some money to the captain and went into his cabin. He was really tired but before he fell asleep, he thought "I hope, I hope that God didn't see me."

That was a bit silly, wasn't it? You know and I know that God sees everything we do! He sees the good things - but he also sees all the bad things. It's the bad things we do that make a barrier between God and us; they stop us from knowing God as our friend. That will stop us from going to heaven when we die. (*Draw barrier - a horizontal line - in picture 6*) That's bad news, isn't it?

It was a beautiful day. The ship sailed out of the harbour. The sea was calm, the sun was shining, the captain was standing on deck. When suddenly a little black cloud appeared. The cloud got bigger, and bigger and bigger!! (*Draw black cloud in picture 2*) Everything grew quiet. The birds disappeared, the wind was gone, the waves were absolutely still. It was the beginning of a huge storm!

There was lightning, thunder, rain, the wind became stronger and stronger and the waves became higher and higher! Can you make the sound of the wind for me? (*Draw waves round the boat*). The boat went up and down. The sailors' faces appeared along the edge of the boat this colour (*paint them in green*) and the waves got higher and higher. One was so high that it flew out of my picture! (*Draw a wave coming over the edge of picture 2*) The water began to fill up the boat. The captain told them to throw the precious cargo overboard to lighten the boat - the barrels of olive oil, the sacks of corn, the skins of wine..... nothing helped.

The captain saw that they were going to drown. "ALL HANDS ON DECK!!" They all came. "Somebody has made God very angry, let's all pray to our own gods and ask them to save us." One man had a piece of wood. He bowed down and said, "Oh god of wood, please save me!" What do you think happened? Nothing, that's right. Another man had a piece of stone. He bowed down and said, "Oh god of stone, please save us!" What do you think happened? Nothing! The captain thought, "Hey, 1,2,3,5,7, somebody's missing" Who do you think it was? Yes, it was Jonah. He was still asleep in his cabin. They woke him up (*shake him awake*) "Jonah, you have to pray to your God. Somebody has made God very angry." "Uhm, sorry captain, I think it's me." "You! What have you done?" "Well captain, God told me to go to Nineveh.." "Nineveh!! But we're going the opposite way!" "I know Captain. You have got a problem and the only way to solve a problem is to get rid of it."

And we all have a problem. It's the wrong things that we do. The only way to solve a problem is to get rid of it. And God got rid of the problem by sending his son Jesus to die on a cross for us. When Jesus died he was being punished. (*Draw vertical line to make cross in picture 6*) We get punished when we do things wrong, don't we? Did Jesus ever do anything wrong? But I just said that he was being punished! When Jesus died he was being punished for all the wrong things that I have done and all the wrong things that everyone who believes and trusts in him has done.

"But if the only way to solve a problem is to get rid of it, how do we get rid of you? We are in the middle of the sea!" "I know captain, you will have to throw me overboard." "What! I can't throw a passenger overboard! We'll get out the oars and try to row to the shore" It was no good. The storm got worse and worse and they had no choice. So they picked Jonah up. They said "Sorry, Jonah's God, to do this, but he told us to do it".... and went "1..2..3, HEAVE !! (*paint Jonah flying through the air in picture 3*).

The moment Jonah hit the water, the wind stopped, the waves died down, it was completely calm. (*Pause in silence*)... The sailors said "WOW! Jonah's God must be the most powerful God! Only the God who made heaven and earth could do that!" and they started to have a party and to praise God and thank him. But what about our friend Jonah? He was in the water. He started to sink. He wished he had learned to swim. He sank down to the bottom, and the Bible says that when he came up, he had seaweed wrapped round his head - ugh! Then suddenly ... he saw this (*draw big fish in picture 3*) it looked like a big red cave.... it was the mouth of a great big fish! It came towards him (*gesture with your hands like the jaws closing suddenly*) GLOOP! It swallowed Jonah whole. "Helloo, helloo! I must be in a cave. But it smells rather fishy in here." And Jonah realized that he was in the belly of a huge fish. There must have been a pocket of air in there because the Bible says he stayed alive inside the fish for three days and nights. Jonah had time to think. He said this: he said **FORGIVE**

Do you think he said sorry to the fish? No, he said sorry to God. Then he felt much better. A few years ago I did the most important thing in my life too when I said sorry to God. I said "I'm really sorry for all the wrong things I have done." I asked him to forgive me for all the wrong things I have done; I asked him to become my friend. I found that having Jesus as your best friend is the most fantastic thing that has ever happened to me.

Do you think God had forgotten about Jonah? Do you think God could still hear him even inside the fish? God knows all about us, wherever we are. When God heard Jonah say sorry, he made the fish have a really bad bellyache. The fish swam near the shore, and threw up! UUUGH! Out flew Jonah, WHEEEE! (*paint Jonah flying through the air, in picture 4*) and he landed on the beach. As he was lying there, he heard a voice that he recognized. It was God. God said to him, "Jonah, go to Nineveh and tell the people what I have told you." Do you think Jonah listened to God this time? Yes, he did. I hope he had a good wash in the sea to get the fishy smell off before he went.

Jonah started to walk. It was a very long way to Nineveh. Here he is. (*Draw him in front of the city gate in picture 5*). Jonah went into the city and walked to the centre where all the people were buying and selling. He raised up his arm and with a very loud voice he shouted, "Listen to me, everybody! God is very angry with all the bad things that you are doing. Unless you say sorry to God and ask him to forgive you, he is going to destroy this whole city!!" A lot of people came to listen to Jonah. (*Draw in lots of people*). They went to tell the king. He listened to Jonah. Then he was so sorry about the way they had all been behaving he told all the people to **STOP** what they were doing, and to say sorry to God. And do you know, all the people in Nineveh said, "Sorry" to God. But saying sorry is not enough, is it? We also have to do something else. We have to do this. We have to STOP doing the wrong things we were doing. And that's exactly what the people did and that day all the people in Nineveh became God's friends.

Do you think Jonah was pleased? No, he wasn't. He went outside the city and sulked under a tree. God said "Jonah, why are you sulking?" Jonah said "Now you're going to forgive them all, and I wanted you to destroy them. They deserve to be destroyed, they disobeyed you, Lord". "Didn't you disobey me too, Jonah, and didn't I give you a second chance when you said sorry?" "Well, yes, Lord, but that was different..." "Well, Jonah, if I can forgive you, then I can certainly forgive a whole city full of people, 120,000 people, who have decided to become my friends and live a new life!".

Jonah found out that it is much better to obey God in the first place than to go through all the problems he went through. But he also found out that God loved him so much that he gave him a second chance, and that God will give each one of us **A FREE START** too, if we will say sorry and ask him to help us from now on, because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. (*refer to picture 6*)

Testimony and prayer.