

**Jonah 3:1-5, 10 (Third Sunday after the Epiphany—Series B)**

**“The Great Mercy of God”**

**Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield, CT**

**January 24, 2021**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our text is the Old Testament lesson recorded in Jonah 3:

<sup>1</sup>And the word of Yahweh came to Jonah a second time saying, <sup>2</sup> “Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and call out to her the proclamation which I am speaking to you.” <sup>3</sup>And Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of Yahweh. Now Nineveh was a great city [belonging] to God, a walk of three days. <sup>4</sup>And Jonah began to enter the city a walk of one day. And he called out and said, “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overturned.” <sup>5</sup>And the men of Nineveh believed in God and they called for a fast and they put on sackcloths, from the greatest of them to the least of them. . . . <sup>10</sup>And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way and God changed His verdict about the evil that He threatened to do to them, and He did not do it.

It took a couple tries to get him to be where God needed him. It took a storm at sea, being thrown overboard, three days in the belly of a big fish, and finally being vomited back up on the shore, but Jonah went. Jonah got up off the beach, covered in seaweed and fish-innards, and went to Nineveh, the great city. He proclaimed to the people of Nineveh what Yahweh told him to preach—five words in Hebrew—“Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overturned.”

God’s message to the people of Nineveh was a warning. He was a witness to their evil (1:2). Later on, the prophet Nahum would charge Nineveh with plotting against the Lord, wanton cruelty, prostitution, materialism, and arrogance. Were these some of the sins that had come up before the Lord and against which His wrath would fall in judgment?

Nevertheless, God gave the people forty days before Nineveh would be “overturned.” This is a word full of meaning. Nineveh and her people will be “overturned” either to further unbelief leading to destruction or the people would be “overturned” to repentance and new life. In

other words, change is coming—either change from life to destruction or from destruction to new life.

Change is what repentance really is. It is a change in heart, mind, and will. It is a turning from sin and evil to God with faith and trust in Him for the forgiveness of sins. In Article Twelve of our Augsburg Confession we read that “repentance consists of two parts. One part is contrition, that is, terrors striking the conscience through the knowledge of sin. The other part is faith, which is born of the Gospel or the Absolution and believes that for Christ’s sake, sins are forgiven. It comforts the conscience and delivers it from terror” (AC XII 3-5).

Did you catch those important words about repentance? It is **born** of the Gospel, brought to life by the Gospel. What is the Gospel? That God chooses to show mercy to sinners by granting them the forgiveness of sins even though they have not deserved nor earned that forgiveness. The Gospel is the good news that God acts for people who by nature are dead in their sins and cannot save themselves (Eph. 2:1). The people of Nineveh had a one-way ticket to destruction. They were squarely under the judgment and wrath of God because of their sins. The thunderbolt of God’s Law, like a hammer, struck down upon them, “Yet forty days!” The people deserved nothing but God’s punishment for their sins. You and I are no different in this respect. The Ninevites clearly understood the sentence rendered against them from God. Do we? Either they would be overthrown by God’s judgment or they would be overthrown because God would bring about a change—repentance—and through faith the people would respond to the work of God the Spirit in their hearts and produce fruits in keeping with repentance.

The Word of God is what brings about this change. The Word is a Means of Grace, a Means that God the Holy Spirit uses to change hearts and bring about repentance and faith in a person. “God has caused the Word to go forth and be proclaimed. In the Word He has the Holy Spirit bring this treasure home and make it our own” (*Large Catechism*).<sup>1</sup> The treasure is the mercy of God—the Gospel, the Absolution, the forgiveness of sins. It is a gift of the Lord’s mercy to those who most assuredly do not deserve it. The Ninevites didn’t deserve mercy. They deserved punishment and destruction (which Jonah really hoped the Lord would give them a good dose of). But through the preaching of the Word of God (done by Jonah) the Lord changed their hearts and minds. The Spirit brought about repentance and faith. “And the men of Nineveh believed in God.” The change in Nineveh started as soon as the words left Jonah’s mouth! Luther taught his students: “Thus the prophet Jonah speaks a mere word (this is what he had been sent for), commanding nothing at all about works. But since the people of Nineveh believed the Word of God, of their own free will and with their faith as the leader and originator they did these works by which they gave *external* proof of their *internal* faith. In plain words, faith alone justifies a person, . . . The works therefore did not make the faith, but the faith performed the works. . . . They believed God’s Word, and by turning away from their wickedness they proved their internal faith by their external works. On account of their faith, which was the fountain and source of the works, God looked favorably on the works of these saints” (italics mine).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Timothy McCain, ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 403.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 19: Minor Prophets II: Jonah and Habakkuk*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 19 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 23, 25.

Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." To have mercy on sinners is God's choice. To change hearts and minds like ours from a state of rebellion and rejection of God to one of repentance, faith, and trust in God is solely the work of the Lord. And this merciful work that God performed on the Ninevites is the same work that He performs on us and all people according to His mercy. And the basis for and the climactic expression of God's mercy is Jesus Christ.

God is gracious to sinners and has mercy on fallen humanity only because of the saving work of Jesus in His perfect life, death, and resurrection. Did wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes win God's favor for the people of Nineveh? No. Did the fasting of people and beast in Nineveh cause God to change His mind and forgive them? No. God chose to have mercy and forgive the people of Nineveh because He would send His One-of-a-Kind Son into the world and His Son would purchase their forgiveness with His blood. God the Holy Spirit worked repentance and faith in the people of Nineveh because Jesus would live a perfect life in their place and because Jesus would suffer God's wrath and judgment meant for them while He died on a cross.

This saving grace by which God is moved to forgive sin and to give salvation to fallen people is His compassionate inclination, mediated through Christ's atonement, revealed in the Gospel, and witnessed to the world in order that it might be believed by all people. God's Word delivers what it promises—forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation from death and hell because Jesus has died and paid the price for all sins and is risen from the dead. There is full forgiveness in Christ alone who brings the mercy of God to people by grace through faith by means of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

And so it was that Jesus, who began His public ministry following His baptism in the Jordan River, proclaimed the Gospel of God and said, "The due time stands fulfilled and the reign and rule of God has drawn near and is now here. Repent and believe in the Gospel." This is the most basic statement concerning the Christian faith: repentance and trust in the Gospel about the incarnate Son of God who stands in the place of all sinners. Jesus stood in your place in order to fulfill the Law for you and to win salvation for you by taking your sins and making them His own, by enduring God's wrath and punishment for those sins on the cross. Jesus shed His blood to atone for your sins. He died for your sins, and by rising again, has won complete victory over sin, death, and hell for you.

God's mercy and grace shown to Nineveh was truly a foretaste of the grace and mercy to come in all its fullness when Jesus took on flesh and lived, died, and rose again in your place. The people of Nineveh were saved by grace alone through faith alone for the sake of Christ alone—God's undeserved mercy shown to sinners whom the Spirit brought to saving faith by the power of the Word. You are saved by that very same grace alone through faith alone for the sake of Christ alone—God's undeserved mercy shown to you whom the Spirit has brought to saving faith by the power of the Word. Amen.