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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
January 21, 2018
3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, Mark 1:14-20

Hymns: 282; 769; 315:1-6; 309

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey *in extent*. ⁴And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

⁵So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.

¹⁰Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Jonah the reluctant prophet.

There are a number of images that come to mind when we think of the prophet Jonah. Most likely the image of Jonah being swallowed by the giant fish comes to mind first. But we need to recall how

Jonah got himself in such a situation that he was thrown into the sea to be swallowed by that fish. Jonah was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II, one of the most prosperous periods in Israel's history. We know very little about his message of repentance to Israel, but we do know that he was a very reluctant prophet to Assyria. In fact it was in his attempt to run away from the calling of the Lord by going to sea that Jonah ended up in that precarious situation in which he was thrown overboard, and swallowed by the fish prepared for this purpose by the Lord and in whose belly Jonah remained for three days. It wasn't that Jonah was afraid of going to Nineveh that made him reluctant, it was his fear that the people of Nineveh would repent. What is evident is that Jonah did not share the deep desire for the salvation of sinners which the Lord holds in His heart, the desire which is evident in the writing of the prophet of Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 11:33 “‘As I live,’ says the Lord God, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?’”

But Jonah didn't hold that same desire for the people of Assyria and its capital metropolis of Nineveh. What our text reveals is a wondrously comforting and at the same time motivating lesson regarding the Lord's desire to save sinners.

THEME: Jonah's Call to Nineveh Reveals the Depth of God's Grace.

There is no reason to suggest that Jonah was reluctant to proclaim God's message among his own countrymen, but when the Lord sent him to Israel's enemies, that confounded Jonah.

I. Proclaiming God's Word in Nineveh of all Places!

Why was Jonah's reaction so negative, his aversion to this calling of God so powerful that he attempted to run away? It was more than that the Assyrians were not his countrymen. They were sinners! Well yeah, aren't we all? But the people of Nineveh had a reputation for being more than a little cruel. They were actually infamous for their inhumane treatment of their enemies. They

found pleasure in other people's pain. Today we would classify them as terrorists of the first order. The atrocities they committed were intended to break the will of any who would stand against them. Because of the reports of their vicious cruelty Jonah was of the opinion that they deserved God's wrath and condemnation. There is nothing in the book of Jonah that suggests that Jonah was reluctant because he feared he would be subjected to Assyrian cruelty. There is ample evidence that Jonah was reluctant to go there because he wanted to withhold the mercies of God from these wicked, cruel people that deserved God's wrath if anyone did.

That is a pretty lousy attitude to have toward other sinners isn't it? But it reveals the nature of man. Jonah wasn't alone in that, and isn't alone in that sentiment. This reveals the nature of our own sinful flesh. We look at others and see them as sinners more deserving of God's wrath than we are. In fact many people commonly ask why God allows the wickedness of this world to go on when it is within His power to strike down any whom He will. Why doesn't He just do it? In fact people might be heard to call out to God, "Do it!"

Of course no one thinks they should be personally included in that number whom God would strike down in His wrath. What the Law of God teaches us is that we also should be and would be included in that number if that were how God operated in this world. But God doesn't want the sinner to die. God calls out to sinners not only of one language, or one race of people, but to all the world, **"turn from your sinful ways and live!"**

And then we too are brought to the realization of our own sin, and must confess that we deserve nothing but punishment. Just already this morning you confessed that you **"justly deserve God's temporal and eternal punishment."** I trust you were sincere in that confession.

So why was Jonah called to Nineveh, of all places? Because there was a great city full of sinners deserving of God's temporal and eternal punishment to whom God would extend a call to repentance. And there it is for you and me as well, the revelation of the extent of God's mercy and grace. He would not have the sinner die. Not any sinner. **Not even me.** Not even me.

And now we take that lesson to heart and realize that the Lord has called us to take His message of repentance to the sinners of this world, not only to those we think are deserving of His grace, because there we would be wrong. There are none, no, not one who is deserving of God's mercy. But rather we are called to take God's message out to those sitting in the darkness of sin and unbelief.

And if we think it is pointless because everyone knows that people who have other religions won't listen anyway, then take heed to the inspired record of Jonah's preaching in Nineveh.

II. Nineveh' Repentance Reveals the Power of the Word to Save.

This was no small task set before Jonah. Nineveh with its surrounding villages is estimated to have been about twenty-five miles long, stretching out along the Tigris River. Yes, it could very easily take a man three days to make his way through all that city delivering the message given to him from God. Jonah was instructed to speak only and exactly what the Lord told him. The tone of the message is revealed. It was an announcement of impending judgment. In forty days Nineveh would be destroyed, overthrown by its enemies, and it had plenty of those. The Medes from the east had already made inroads into the Assyrian empire, and the Babylonians tried time and again to overthrow Nineveh. That is not what made the difference.

That is not why the people of Nineveh took the Jonah's message to heart. The message came from God. The Word of God is powerful as we are told in the Epistle to the Hebrews:

Hebrews 4:12-13 "For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. ¹³ And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things *are* naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must give* account."

That was true then even as it is true yet today. The law condemns. The law of God pierces the conscience. The Word is powerful and

effective. It convicts the sinner, bringing contrition. And that is what is immediately evident among the people of Nineveh. *“The people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.”* (Jonah 3:5) Yes, we are told that this included everyone from the king himself putting on sackcloth and confessing his sin, to the lowliest of the paupers.

The Lord’s reluctance to destroy sinners is seen in the Lord’s response to Nineveh.

Jonah 3:10 “Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.”

The Lord’s response in pure gospel. The Lord was merciful toward the people, much to the chagrin of the Prophet Jonah who had little love for the Assyrians. That wasn’t true of the Lord. God loved them and had compassion on them. He turned away the impending judgment. The people of Nineveh, as evil as they had been, found grace with the Lord, and it changed things for generations, for **generations**. Eventually judgment would befall Nineveh after they resumed their sinful ways, but that would be a hundred years in the future.

God’s response to the penitential turning away from sin among the people of Nineveh was pure gospel, and the gospel is powerful to save. We must never discount the power of God’s Word to convict and convince the sinner. We have an insert in our bulletins from the CLC’s Committee on Domestic Missions. It is the fourth of a series on the habits of mission minded congregations. This insert emphasizes confidence in the Word. Jonah didn’t go through Nineveh announcing programs and youth groups and exciting and fun worship services with contemporary music. That sounds ridiculous to even suggest that doesn’t it? It would have been ludicrous! Besides, they already had all that with their idol worship in their pagan temples. He would have accomplished nothing. He went with the message God gave him, and faithfully proclaimed that message and great things happened, even as he feared. Yes, even as Jonah **feared**, because in spite of Jonah’s lack of love for the Assyrian people, he understood the power of God’s Word.

So that is what is true for us yet today. So many churches today are caught up in social programs, and societal justice, and fun worship with contemporary music, convinced that this will work for the salvation of souls. Maybe the walls are bursting in those building, but apart from the gospel there is no salvation, and it is the gospel alone that saves. It is still ludicrous to believe that we can assist the gospel with schemes and social programs. What the Apostle Paul emphasized in his ministry was the gospel. His theme statement for the epistle to the Romans is: *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.”* (Romans 1:16) That was true from the very beginning. It remains true to this day. It is true to all eternity.

As we endeavor to show forth the glory of Jesus is what appears to be an increasingly sinful and even heathen society, and a sin darkened world, may we always remember that the power of God unto salvation is found in His Word. Preach the Word, show people their sin with the law of God, and show people their Savior, the wondrous glory of the only Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ with the gospel. It is Jesus holy life, it is Jesus sufferings and death upon the cross that secured our salvation. Share that gospel truth, and then trust the Lord to bring the most blessed results. Never despair. God loves all sinners and desires their salvation, and the Spirit works through the Word unto salvation in as many as the Lord our God will call.

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.