

EASTER VIGIL – APRIL 16, 2022 – JONAH 3:1-10

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

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

“Then the Word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.’ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the Word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published throughout Nineveh, ‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish.’ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that He had said He would do to them, and He did not do it.”

Jonah was a reluctant prophet of God’s Word. He just didn’t want to go and preach the message that the Ninevites were sinful and needed to repent of their many sins. Of course, he

was first and foremost concerned for his own skin – those who spoke against the Ninevites weren't the most popular people, much like those who try to assert the sinfulness of our own day and age. Jonah joined a long line of Old Testament (and even New Testament) prophets that weren't eager to be chosen by God to directly do His will. Moses and even Paul come to mind in this category of reluctance. Without a great deal of repentance and knowledge of sin, they (and we) would perish eternally, because in the sight of God, one sin against His law is punishable by death. There is no hope for us sinful creatures – we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We not only sin much and are guilty of punishment – we ARE sin. Every thought, word and deed that proceeds from our sinful hearts is opposed to the will of God in Christ Jesus. We are self-centered, self-righteous, and most importantly, selfish creatures, ever since the fall into sin of Adam and Eve. But, there is hope! That's why we're here this evening; indeed, why we gather to hear the Word of God and receive His gifts on a weekly (or even more often) basis. Even though we are sinners, Christ died for each and every one of us. Not only that, He rose again from the dead on the Third Day, so that we would also rise when our earthly lives are over. We'll be talking about that three days thing later on; just remember, that often the Scriptures prefigure events in the life of Christ even hundreds or thousands of years later. This foreshadowing just reinforces for us the unity of the Bible in its testimony about Christ as the only hope for sinful mankind. Let's talk about this in a little bit more depth.

How many inferences are there in this text to confession and repentance? Let's see: the King of Nineveh – called for a fast, wore sackcloth and ashes. This reminds us of things that we even commemorate today to mark repentance. Ash Wednesday – reminders that we are

sinful, from dust we are and to dust we will return. We start our Lenten preparation for Easter with this same mark on our forehead or on our hand. Most importantly – the king realized that there was a problem. Often, that’s the hardest thing to get through to people – that things are not right between us and God. We are sinful creatures; He is the most holy God. Without some intervention we will be rightly destroyed. Jonah spent three days in the belly of a great fish – time to reflect upon his rebellion against God. When he was presented with the opportunity to say no to God again, he didn’t. Kind of like “solitary confinement” in a prison – hopefully the message will get through. But, there’s also a connection between this “time out” in the fish and the three days that Christ was in the tomb after His crucifixion. It wasn’t that Jesus needed a “cooling off” period – He was sinless. But, it was to remind us that Jesus kept the Law of God perfectly – just as Jonah was disobedient, so Jesus was obedient to the Father in everything

There’s also a reference to the forty days until Nineveh would be destroyed – no accident that this was the period of time that Jesus spent in the wilderness, being tempted by the devil. Unlike the Ninevites, Jesus didn’t sin, and wasn’t sent there for punishment. He went there to show that through the power provided by the Word of God, even the devil himself can be defeated, and was defeated, by our perfect Savior.

But, sometimes we just aren’t convinced that God’s salvation is for us. That was the case for the king of Nineveh in our text. He said, “Who knows? God MAY turn and relent and turn from His fierce anger...” He thought, after Jonah’s rousing sermon, that MAYBE there was hope of forgiveness. It’s natural, when confronted with all of our sins, and our sinfulness, to

think that the possibility of God's forgiveness is remote – after all, we aren't very forgiving to our brothers when they sin against us.

We don't trust completely in God to save us – we think that there has to be something that we must DO in order to be saved. Whether that takes the form of “deciding to follow Jesus”, or counting both our works and the faith that has been placed in our hearts, we are equally guilty of the same kind of skepticism of the Ninevite king. The Holy Spirit works within us to turn us from this conditional belief in forgiveness, toward complete, child-like trust in Christ our Redeemer, the only hope that we have for our salvation.

What does all of this have to do with Easter? I mean, this is a good discussion about Law and Gospel, confession and absolution, that might be better suited for Ash Wednesday than the Easter Vigil. That's precisely why we have the service of readings that details the salvation history – to show that our rescue from sin, death and the devil wasn't something new in Jesus' time. Rather, it was designed from of old – God set His plan into motion immediately when Adam and Eve sinned. It wasn't set into motion because we deserved His salvation, but because of His unconditional love that knows no bounds.

Just as God brought Jonah out of the belly of the big fish on the third day, and restored him to Himself, so the Father brought Jesus out of the tomb on the third day, to demonstrate that His sacrifice was good enough to the Father to count for all mankind. We aren't just proclaiming that Jesus isn't dead anymore – that's just part of the story! Rather, we are saying because He is risen, so we will rise, and live with God in heaven forever. There are more consequences of Christ's resurrection than just for Him, or just for His contemporaries – they

are for each and every one of us. The Holy Spirit continues to work in our hearts to get us to believe this, and to stop doubting and believe!

There is a new hymn that was written just before LSB was written. Rev. Stephen Starke wrote it as an Easter hymn, and the words are very striking. “All the Earth with Joy is Sounding” (LSB #462). I don’t know that I would recommend this for congregation singing, at least around here, because it’s not the easiest hymn, musically, to master. But, the words are just amazing – I don’t remember Jonah being mentioned when talking about the joys of Easter before; we talk about predictions about Jesus from Isaiah and Malachi and other prophets. However, we ought not overlook this prophesy!

In Stanza 1 – “All the earth with joy is sounding: Christ has risen from the dead! He the greater Jonah, bounding from the grave, His three-day bed, wins the prize: death’s demise – songs of triumph fill the skies.” That kind of sums it up, doesn’t it? Greater than Jonah was Christ, but we are pointed ahead to His “three-day bed” by the narrative about Jonah the prophet of God. Rather than just pointing people to their sin and forgiveness through the coming Christ, Jesus actually caused the forgiveness to be a reality, because He was and is God

Remember when the religious leaders demanded a sign from Jesus to prove that He was the Christ? The only sign that He said would be provided to them was the “sign of Jonah”. Now, of course, this was pointing ahead to His death and resurrection, that He would survive and go on to accomplish His mission. But, there was also an inference to the Old Testament prefiguring the events of the New, specifically with Jesus’ “perfecting” what Jonah set up first.

Jesus was the “second Adam”, the “perfect Jonah”, the Redeemer of the human race. That’s why we celebrate so much this night – because without Him, we’d have nothing to look

forward to except death in the grave when our earthly lives are over. That would be just enough bad news for us to become despondent and give up, if it were the end of the story. However, thanks be to God, there is more to the story! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Let me be the first to proclaim this wonderful truth to you this year. We've spent the season of Lent preparing for this unbridled joy; let's celebrate and have great glee! No longer is Christ in the grave; He is risen just as He said. Because He is risen, we too will rise when we die, to life eternal in heaven. We don't have all the answers as to how and why we are saved from our sins, but the fact remains that we are, and the Word of God says so and never lies. Thanks be to God for all that He has done for us – everything for our salvation. Amen.

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

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.