

I.N.I.

Third Sunday after Epiphany

Jan. 22, 2012

Jonah 3:1-10

In Christ Jesus, who is not willing that anyone should perish, but that everyone come to repentance and to the knowledge of the truth, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

What a contrast we have in the person from this morning's sermon text and the one from our Scripture reading last week. Last Sunday we heard of the young boy Samuel who declared to the **LORD: SPEAK, FOR YOUR SERVANT HEARS.** And then Samuel listened and did what God had told him.

Well if we were to characterize Jonah's first response to the Lord's call it would be this: **STOP SPEAKING LORD, FOR YOUR SERVANT IS NOT LISTENING.** Instead of listening Jonah tried to flee and not do as God had commanded him.

But as we know in this well known story, the LORD caught up with Jonah and then caught Jonah in the belly of the great fish. He miraculously delivered him from drowning and it was while Jonah was inside of that smelly belly of the fish, that he was led to realize that **SALVATION COMES FROM THE LORD!** He was also led to accept God's call to go to that wicked city of Nineveh and proclaim to the people the message from God.

And what was the message that he was to proclaim?---Judgment and condemnation upon their sin and unbelief. The city of Nineveh was in the nation of Assyria. Therefore these people were Gentiles. However, they were not just any Gentiles, they were a very cruel and wicked people. Nineveh represented the pride and power, the brutality and arrogance of worldly kingdoms at their worst. They did what they wanted to, with no thought of listening too or obeying the LORD Jehovah. They didn't believe in any coming Messiah.

At first reading we may wonder why a text like this one is chosen to be studied and laid upon our hearts during this season of Epiphany. We have been told that the Epiphany season demonstrates, manifests and shows forth the Godly majesty, power and dominion in the person of Christ, but the Epiphany season also shows the Lord's holy will to save sinners. When God's will to save sinners is accomplished through the preaching of the Good News of Jesus, that in itself is an epiphany, a showing forth of both God's power and God's grace.

In our text this morning the LORD speaks to Nineveh and clearly manifests His majesty, power and dominion as King of kings. The LORD God rules. He sets the limits and boundaries even for the ungodly. They can go so far and no further. **FORTY DAYS AND YOU SHALL BE OVERTHROWN, DESTROYED.** Your wickedness, your arrogance, your power and pride shall come to an end. But in our text we also see in a most miraculous and wonderful way the grace, the undeserved love of our God who wants everyone to come to repentance and to a knowledge of the truth. The important thing to note is that all of this is the Lord's doing, His work. Jonah simply proclaims God's Word and the LORD God affects the change in the hearts of the hearers. Our theme this morning reflects that thought:

THE LORD WORKS TRUE REPENTANCE---

1) BROUGHT ABOUT BY HIS WORD.

Jonah learned his lesson and went to Nineveh to proclaim the message from the LORD. The city was a very large one, so large that it took three days to journey through it. Some commentators note that the ancient city of Nineveh included 3 other cities within it. I guess today we would call them suburbs. The

populated area of the city stretched from the Tigris River to the ridge of hills to the northeast, about 25 miles in area.

In verse 4 we are told that after a day's journey into the city, perhaps in the very heart of the metropolis, Jonah begins to proclaim: **YET FORTY DAYS, AND NINEVEH WILL BE OVERTHROWN.** These words revealed several things about God.

1) They revealed God's righteous anger over against sin, against the open rebellious, arrogant disobedience of the people of Nineveh and their leaders. God hates sin! God has clearly declared in His Word **THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH...THE SOUL THAT SINS SHALL DIE!**

2) The proclamation made by Jonah also reveals that God is intent upon punishing sin. Punishment for sin will come, in this case it will come in 40 days. It is not a maybe, but a will be.

3) The proclamation of His future punishment was also a special act of God's grace. Yes, it is a judgment, an announcement of destruction, but in it there is a reason for hope. If God had decided to destroy Nineveh because of its unbelief and sinfulness and there was no hope that He would change, there would really be no real purpose for Jonah to proclaim the message, except to scare them. Therefore the message was not just a message of law and judgment against a godless people, but a call to repentance, a reaching out with grace that it is not too late.

And that is exactly what a call to repentance is all about. The Law of God must be proclaimed to all sinners, believers and unbelievers alike. To show God's seriousness in His justice; to show His righteous anger and indignation over against man's stubborn, rebellious spirit toward His unchanging commands; to proclaim His intended punishment upon sin and the sinner. But the Law is also proclaimed so that the sinner **HEARS** the message with his **HEART**, be led to turn away from his sinful ways and live. That is repentance.

The word repentance literally means "a change of mind," with mind meaning the place of moral reflection. We would probably say today "a change of heart." Repentance that God through His Word works in the heart of the sinner is true sorrow for sin. It is first a terror that strikes the conscience through the knowledge that because of our sin we have merited, we have earned and therefore deserve God's temporal and eternal punishment. We deserve to be sent to hell forever. But repentance in the broad sense also includes faith. Faith which looks to Christ and believes that our sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

True godly repentance can only be worked in the heart through God's Word, both Law and Gospel. It cannot be accomplished in the heart of the individual without both sorrow over sin and faith in the Savior from sin. Sorrow over sin without faith in Jesus only leads to despair and death. Sorrow over sin and then a desire to make up for our sin or do better is work righteous and also leads only to death. But sorrow over sin and faith in Jesus brings about a real change in the heart and in the life.

THE LORD WORKS TRUE REPENTANCE--- 2) DEMONSTRATED BY OUR ACTIONS.

We see in our text the vital connection between repentance, brought about by the Word of God on the hearts of the sinner; and the fruits of repentance shown in the changed behavior of those who repent and believe in Jesus. This too is brought about by God's Word.

True repentance is demonstrated by our actions. The outward sign of repentance in the lives of the Ninevites was truly amazing. It was indeed a testimony to the surpassing power of God's Word and testified to what happened in their hearts. We are told in verse 5, **SO THE PEOPLE OF NINEVEH BELIEVED GOD, PROCLAIMED A FAST, AND PUT ON SACKCLOTH, FROM THE GREATEST TO THE LEAST OF THEM.**

The mighty king himself was so moved by the Word of God that he took off his robe, the sign of his worldly glory and power, and covered himself with sackcloth (a ruff burlap type of material which was

very uncomfortable to wear) and ashes. This was a sign of true repentance and acknowledgment of having broken God's commands.

What a remarkable change in the hearts of these unbelieving people. Evidently this repentance was not just sorrow over sins and hoping God would not punish them, but a trust in the LORD JEHOVAH and in the promised Messiah. For years later Jesus, when speaking of the unbelieving Scribes and Pharisees of His day, said this of the Ninevites, **THE MEN OF NINEVEH WILL RISE IN THE JUDGMENT WITH THIS GENERATION AND CONDEMN IT, BECAUSE THEY REPENTED AT THE PREACHING OF JONAH; AND INDEED A GREATER THAN JONAH IS HERE.** (Matt. 12:41) Jesus preached **REPENT AND BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS.** But the people of His day would not listen to His words without first being given a sign from the Lord. Jesus called them **AN ADULTERESS AND EVIL GENERATION**, the only sign they needed was the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the sign of the prophet Jonah who was three days in the belly of the great fish and then vomited up on dry ground. So also Jesus said, the Son of Man would be three days in the belly of the earth and in three days rise again. The Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day showed no signs of repentance, the people of Nineveh did.

Finally we see in this text the patience of God. God is not slack in His promises of grace or in His threats of punishment. However, He does show amazing patience with us sinners. He does not deal with us in haste, He does not punish us immediately as our sins deserve. Instead, He too today, comes with the message of repentance and He extends His time of grace for us to hear and to heed that message. What an amazing God we have!

We see the seriousness of God's intent to save sinners. He was willing to sacrifice His only Son, to damn Him for us and all the sinners of the world. He gives us full and free forgiveness in exchange for His Son's shed blood; Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. We also see His seriousness to save the sinner in the fact that He patiently brings that message to us day after day, week after week, month after month and year after year, calling us again and again to turn with repentant hearts to Him in faith.

THE LORD WORKS TRUE REPENTANCE---

3) Pleasing to God

And that leads us to the third point of our sermon this morning. True repentance is pleasing to God. True repentance is a gracious gift of God. We receive the benefits and blessings of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins, not through our works or merits, not even because of or through our repentance; as if somehow we now earned God's grace by being sorry; no, God's grace is ours simply by believing the message of forgiveness through the crucified and risen Christ. This is a gift of God the Holy Spirit, worked in our heart.

Have we felt this, have we experienced this? We all have if we are believers in Christ. We sin against our spouse with loveless words or in selfish actions. God's Word condemns us. The Spirit leads us to repent and we show our repentance by asking our spouse to forgive us and showing love to him or her. We disobey our parents, we sass back to them. God's Word condemns us. We are led by God's Word to repent of our sin and we show it by telling our parents we are sorry, seek their forgiveness and we then do what we are told. Fruits in keeping with repentance.

When we are led to be truly sorry for our sins, we are also led by the Spirit to stop committing that sin and seek the strength to live for Christ.

So, what if we fall into that sin again and again, does that mean we are not Christians, not real believers? It may mean we are insincere, but it also may mean that we need to realize that in our weakness we are bound in a sinful action that we cannot by ourselves get out of. We then need to throw ourselves upon our Lord and Savior and seek the strength, courage and confidence to say no to such sinful temptations. We may also need to go to someone who can help us in this situation. You can

always come to me as your pastor, or seek a Christian brother or sister who will help.

We should rejoice when we hear the Law preached, yes rejoice because it leads us to see ourselves as we really are---sinners in need of repentance and forgiveness.

Rejoice, because the Spirit through the Law leads us to godly sorrow over our sins, to a godly repentance which turns away from our sins. And then when we hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Spirit leads us to cling alone to Jesus and His cross for forgiveness, full and free.

That was the message Jonah was called to proclaim and it saved a large city from destruction and brought many, many people to saving faith. That is the message we are called to proclaim to a world reserved for judgment, so that countless millions will repent and believe and be saved. A message of God's judgment upon sin and unbelief but compassion and forgiveness upon those who repent and believe in Jesus Christ.

Amen.