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Epiphany 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Lord of Life”

Text: Mark 1:14-20; Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The first three Sundays of this year we have celebrated the Circumcision of our Lord, the Epiphany of our Lord, and the Baptism of our Lord. Today in keeping with that theme, I think we should call today the Life of our Lord. The title on the cover of the bulletin is Sanctity of Life Sunday, but it is important to remember that all life is not our life, to do with as we please, but His life. His life given in creation; His life given in redemption; and that makes all life holy, because all life is His life given to us. And so the question I would like to ask to start off this sermon today is this: **how is His life faring in our world today?**

Well, many would say: not so good. Progression in one area is met with regression in another. So-called advances in science seem more grizzly than ever. It's almost like the little boy trying to plug up the holes in the dike – as soon as he gets his finger in one leak, another one springs forth, and he soon finds himself out of fingers. I read an article that said we have now passed the 40 million mark in legal abortions since Roe v. Wade. That means we have aborted more babies than the total population of Canada; more than twice the population of Australia; and more than the combined population of 12 US states. If one second of silence were observed for every child that has been aborted since 1973 – just one second – we would have to be silent every day, around the clock, for a year and three months. The memorial built on the site of the Oklahoma City bombing has 168 empty bronze and stone chairs, 19 of which are child-sized. I am told it is a very moving sight. But what would a field of 40 million child-sized chairs look like? . . . And these are just statistics about the unborn! I wonder what the statistics would tell us about the very old, those not given the care they need, those seduced into premature death? And now we are entering the epochs of the possibilities of cloning, using frozen embryos for scientific research, and what else? What else? . . . Another article I read recently said we have gone from debates about *taking* life, to debates about *making* life, and soon we will begin *faking* life.

So back to our question: **how is the life of our Lord faring in the world today?**

But as grizzly and awful as things might look in our world today, I must tell you, the ancient kingdom of Assyrian was even worse. The Assyrians whose capital city was a place called *Nineveh*. They made the Nazis look nice; the KKK look kind; and abortionists look Ablaze!TM And our statistics of death were nothing when compared with theirs. They were the meanest, orneriest, stubbornest bunch of people you could ever meet. Hard to imagine, isn't it? And it is to these folks that Jonah was told to go preach. And not just to the fringes of their country, but right into the capital city, right into the belly of the beast! And tell them that if they didn't change in 40 days, if they didn't repent, they would be overthrown and destroyed. . . . No wonder Jonah didn't want to go, and preferred being drowned in the sea rather than face whatever the Assyrians would have cooked up for Him! We wouldn't have gone either. Not one of us.

But what happened to Jonah? He wound up in the belly of the beast anyway, didn't he? First of a fish, and then to Nineveh. So it wasn't even as good as a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" kind of a thing – he got two for the price of one! . . . And so Jonah went, eventually. He went once he understood that the enemy, the problem, wasn't the Assyrians, but sin. **And sin not out there, in them, but in here, in us.** He was no better than the Assyrians, for he was willing to let them die in their sins and cause their eternal death through his fear and silence, which would have made him guilty of a far greater number of murders than them. Of men, women, and children, born and unborn, for how many generations? *O Jonah, how is the life of our Lord faring in your heart?*

O Christian, how is the life of our Lord faring in your heart? It is so easy to point the finger at others – at the Nazis, the Butcher of Baghdad, the abortionists, the doctors tinkering with life, at Jonah and his hard-heartedness. But what about you and me? How many are we content to let die – physically *and* spiritually – by our fear and silence? When we run away and hide – and not from Assyrians, but from our friends and neighbors and family members?! Like Jonah, when we run from the belly of one beast, it's straight into the belly of another! But not of a fish – we should be so lucky. But the beast of hell, who feels never quite so satisfied as when he consumes another person.

But to us Assyrians, to you and me, we modern-day Jonahs, a preacher has come. A prophet. The greatest prophet. To preach repentance unto the forgiveness of sins; a repentance and forgiveness that creates such a belly-ache in the beast that he is forced to spit us out. A prophet named Jesus, who was in fact a prophet, speaking the Word of

God, as we heard in the Holy Gospel: ***“After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’”*** Believe in the Gospel which tells us that this prophet is much more than a prophet, but the very Son of God, come to be swallowed by the beast. To take our place – not *with* us, but *instead* of us – in the belly of the beast. To be that morsel so tempting and tasty that it was an offer the beast could not refuse. Eat me, consume me; not them, Jesus says. And so Jesus goes to the cross, with our sins all over Him and in Him and through Him. Our sins of fear and silence; our sins of hatred and hurt; our sins of jealousy and selfishness; our sins of pride and arrogance; our sins of murder and the fact that we don’t even care what happens to others. All of it! Jesus becomes the worst Assyrian, the worst Jonah, the worst Nazi, the worst abortionist, the worst 21st century American – all at the same time! So full of and covered with our sin that even His Father – His own Father! – can’t even look at Him. He rejects Him, forsakes Him, and lets the beast fill His stomach with His Son.

Jonah wouldn’t do it; we wouldn’t do it; but the love of Jesus for you wouldn’t let Him not do it! . . . Until on the third day, the beast does not spit Jesus out – Jesus rather tears a hole in the side of the beast, and slays him from the inside out. And so the belly of the beast is no longer our destiny – as much as we may deserve it. No, for us now, there is life from the dead, with Jesus. Life from the dead, not eventually, but now, as the life of our Lord is given to us already here and now. For when you are baptized, it is a resurrection from the dead. When you are absolved of your sins, it is a resurrection from the dead. When you eat and drink the body and blood of your Saviour in faith, it is a resurrection from the dead. For in all of these things, these means, is the gospel of forgiveness. Forgiveness, which is the taking from us the death of sin, and raising us to live a new life. It is putting us in Christ and Christ in us. His death our death, and His victory our victory. For as the Catechism says, *“where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.”* (*Explanation to the Sacrament of the Altar: What is the benefit of the eating and drinking?*)

And so what do we have to fear? If the belly of the beast has been defeated, what now can bring me down? Back down from the life, the new life, my Saviour has given me? . . . *O how like Jonah are we!* For we are not yet free from our body of sin, even though Christ now lives in us. How quickly Jonah forgot. After being freed from the belly of the fish, and going to the Ninevites, and preaching to them the gospel of repentance unto the forgiveness of sins – all was not well! He relapsed. He fell. He got angry at God for actually making his preaching effective and saving the Ninevites! God forgave their sins! But how could He? Didn’t He know how bad they were? Wasn’t Jonah’s preaching to them just to justify God’s destruction? How could He . . . How could He save these . . .

these murderous, barbarous, no good, false god worshipping scumbags?!

O Jonah! And yet who do *we* think is not worth forgiving today? Beyond forgiving? Too horrible a sinner? Jonah had to learn . . . again! And so do we. Often. Don't we? But that's why it was not just Jesus who came to us and preached the gospel of repentance unto the forgiveness of sins, but as we heard, He called others. To come to us with His love and forgiveness. Simon, Andrew, James, John, and more. To preach His preaching, to give His gifts, to give His life, to all. Often. Over and over again. As often as we fall, that we might repent, and receive. And so today. The forgiveness that you receive here is His; the body and blood His; the baptism His; the preaching His; the life His. Through those He sends, in His great love, to us modern-day Assyrians. Into the belly of our beastly world, to save us. . . . And also through you, as you take His Word and forgiveness out into the world, the beastly world. The world which sees the jaws of death as a friend; that sees abortion and mercy-killing as an answer; that sees life not as a miracle, but as a biological process that can be used however we see fit. Are those Ninevites worth saving?

The fact that you and I are here today and alive answers that question with an emphatic "Yes!" For we are the Ninevites. To us has been preached the Word of God, and we have received His life and forgiveness, through the prophet who came to *us* after passing through the belly of the beast.

And so we now go, with His blessing upon us, His life and love in us, and the blood of His forgiveness covering us. For the appointed time has grown very short. This world is passing away, as life is sacrificed on the altar of death. But the life that we have and proclaim is greater. Greater than the false gods of this world. Greater than the beast who seems to be consuming this world. Greater than the fears that would keep us silent. For it is His life, living in us. His life still giving life.

So how is His life faring in our world today? It is as it always has. Things may look bad, out there, and in here [in our hearts]; but do not despair. The One in you is greater than the one in the world. (1 John 4:4) The victory has already been won. Life lives, death is done, and the only fish we have to worry about now are the ones caught in the nets of the Church. To bring them into the boat that they be not swallowed by the beast. That with us, Christ's life may be their life. A holy life, a sacred life, both now and forever.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord unto everlasting life. Amen.

(Statistics at the beginning of this sermon in "Whatever Happened to the Human Race" by Dr. Jean Garton in For the Life of the World, July 2005, Vol. 9 Number 3, p. 8-9)