

3 April 2019
Lent 4 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“This Is the Word of the Lord”

Text: Jonah 3:1-10; The Passion, part 4

Mention Jonah and the first thing that comes into most peoples' minds is the great fish that swallowed him. But we don't read that part of the story at the Easter Vigil - we read what happens next. When the Word of the Lord comes to a fish-slime-covered Jonah a second time and tells him to go preach to Nineveh. The great fish is in the background, but it is what comes next that is more important. Jonah preaches, the people listen and repent, and they are saved.

Jonah is not surprised. We would be, I think. For I think we have, to some degree, lost confidence in the Word of God. For today, we look around at a world as evil as Nineveh was back then, and think: Why bother? They're not going to listen. They're not going to change their ways. They're not going to repent. If we speak, they'll just call us haters or bigots or intolerant. And then we'll be persecuted, or worse. And the Word of the Lord is silenced by our own doubts and fears.

But Jonah didn't doubt the power of the Word of God. He didn't doubt that Nineveh could or would repent - he just didn't want them to! He didn't want them to be saved. They were too evil. They were too far gone. *Crucify them!* is what Jonah wanted. Or at the very least they should be flogged or stoned or wiped out with fire and brimstone. But forgiven? No way. That's why Jonah ran. And the same word that ordered the great fish to swallow Jonah and then spit him out three days later, worked in the hearts of the king and the people of Nineveh and brought them to repentance and faith. Just as Jonah knew it would.

And Jonah was furious. Furious at the mercy and love of God.

As were the Jewish leaders in the days of Jesus. For there were great sinners among them in their day as well: prostitutes, tax collectors, adulterers, and Jesus was befriending them! He was teaching them and eating with them and, worst of all, forgiving them! But it's not that easy Jesus, they wanted to say to Him. They need to clean themselves up first, follow the Law first, prove themselves reformed first, be good first, earn their way back into God's good graces first. *Like us*. And then, maybe, they can be forgiven.

But these folks had heard the Word of the Lord from the mouth of Jesus, and just as with the Ninevites, that Word worked in their hearts and brought them to repentance and faith. And whenever there is repentance and faith - faith in God's promised Saviour - there is

forgiveness of sin.

But the Jewish leaders were right, in a sense - it wasn't easy. This forgiveness did have to be earned, but not by them and not by us, but by Jesus in our place. And so earn it He did. He was born without sin, He lived without sin, and He died with our sin. He was flogged with the flogging we deserve, and wore a crown made of the thorns that only first started growing because we plunged the world into sin. The devil thought he could overthrow Jesus in the wilderness after 40 days, but just as with Nineveh, he could not. And after Jesus spent three days in the belly not of a great fish but of the earth, wearing not sackcloth but grave clothes, and then was not spit out but rose of His own accord, our forgiveness, our redemption, our life was won. Easy it was not. But the Word of the Lord was fulfilled. The Word made flesh did it.

And that saved the people of Nineveh, the people of Israel, and all the people who came before them and after them, including you and me.

This is the Word of the Lord: Repent! And we repent. This is the Word of the Lord: You are forgiven! And we are. This is the Word of the Lord: Rise! And we will. For this is the Word of the Lord: Jesus. The fulfillment of the Word, the content of the Word, and the Word made flesh. And we believe. Yes, Jesus is the Son of God, come to save us.

Jonah didn't like that Word. The Jewish leaders didn't like that Word. And maybe we don't, at times, either. But we need that Word, for without it, we are lost. Not just them out there, those really bad people, Ninevites, and those we might consider great sinners today, but you and me. Jonah had to learn that, and maybe so do we.

So thank goodness for the Word of the Lord that works in our hearts, leading us to repentance and faith. And it is all the powerful Word that does it. Nothing in us. Nothing in Nineveh. Nothing in us.

The book of Jonah ends with Jonah brooding over God's mercy and forgiveness. We're not told there was a "happily ever after" - although I like to think there was; that Jonah himself repented and learned to rejoice in God's forgiveness for him. But whenever the Scriptures leave stories open-ended like that, it is so that we will look at ourselves and put ourselves into the story and see how it is with us. Are we brooding or rejoicing? Are we repenting or accusing? Are we listening to the Word of the Lord, or doubting it and its power?

But with Jonah and his story, there's more to it than that for us. For just as Jonah spent three days in the belly of the great fish, and Jesus spent three days in the belly of the earth, baptized into Jesus, so have we. We have been baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection, Jonah's swallowing and spitting, and set free. Set free to live and to rejoice in the mercy and love of God for us. To now brood and accuse is like crawling back into

the belly of the fish, back into the grave of sin and death from which we have been rescued. It really is. Brooding and accusing is dark and hopeless.

But we have been spit back out into the light - into the light of God's love, to live as His children, proclaiming His victory over sin and death not only by our words but by our lives. And knowing the Word of the Lord that so powerfully worked in us, can do the same in others. Even Ninevites.

And so in the Easter Vigil, we rejoice as we hear the story of God's deliverance of Nineveh. For we know it is the story of our deliverance as well. As so in the Vigil we pray:

O God, as the prophet Jonah spent three days in the belly of the great fish, so Your Son Jesus spent three days in the heart of the earth. Grant us repentance to embrace our death in Him through Holy Baptism and to proclaim His victory over sin and death to all the world; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.