

Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 21, 2018

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The Light to Lighten the Gentiles Shone in Nineveh.

Rev. George Ferch

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

The ministry of Jonah, “the reluctant missionary,” is a gem with many facets. There is the facet of God’s gracious call to Jonah. We might examine Jonah’s unwillingness, then willingness, to travel to Nineveh. Jesus used God’s miraculous deliverance of Jonah from the belly of the great fish as a type of his resurrection from the dead. Who can miss Jonah’s ill-advised anger toward the LORD’s compassion? Then there is the Epiphany Season facet.

The Epiphany Gentiles the LORD God called to repentance in this case were the Ninevites. Today we would call them Iraqis. God used the same plan he uses today to bring sinners to the saving knowledge of their redemption in Christ; the preaching of God’s Word.

The Light to Lighten the Gentiles Shone in Nineveh. God accomplishes his will to save sinners through the preaching of his Word. Jonah proclaimed judgment on sin and unbelief. Those who repent experience God’s compassion.

The Jonah we meet at this point “obeyed the Word of the Lord and went to Nineveh.” The city of Nineveh, its ruins are outside present day Mosul, Iraq, was one of the great cities in the Assyrian Empire. In tourist terms, it would take three days to see everything. The Ninevites worshipped the Assyrian idols. Their idolatry did not bear the fruits of holiness and love but “evil ways and violence.” Idolatry continues to bear hatred and violence against others in that region.

The LORD had called Jonah to go “to that great city.” Jonah went to proclaim the message God had entrusted to him. Jonah first proclaimed judgment upon their sin and unbelief. “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” God wanted these Gentiles to know him, the only true God, and worship him. The light of God’s grace was shining on them. Even in God’s pronouncement of judgment, there is mercy. The LORD God gave Nineveh 40 days to repent rather than destroying the city immediately.

This reminds us of the 120 years God gave the earth before the Flood. God gave Pharaoh plenty of time to let his people go. We have our hours on earth as a time of grace, as do all people. Many do not recognize that the purpose of life is to prepare for the final judgment. This is why we listen to the message of repentance and share it with others, just as Jonah did with the Ninevites. God accomplishes his will to save sinners through the preaching of his Word. That word begins with judgment against sin and unbelief.

Jonah preached that God will punish all who do not worship him. The law worked the contrition for sin God desired. “The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.”

St. Peter wrote in his second epistle, “For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household.” That means we recognize that we deserve such judgment again our sins. God calls us to daily contrition through our taking him at his word. God calls all sinners, beginning with me, to confess my sins and mourn over them; if not in literal sackcloth and ashes, then with a broken heart and contrite sigh.

This is not the only message through which God accomplishes his will to save sinners. There also is the preaching of his Word of compassion and love, the good news of our Savior Jesus Christ, which those who repent hold near and dear to our hearts. This is our joy and hope as it was for our Ninevite brothers and sisters in Christ.

God's compassion that prevented his punishment came as healing balm to the broken hearts of the Ninevites. God kept his promise. "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened."

The Ninevites bore fruits to show that theirs was godly contrition. The King declared, "Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands." God had turned them from unbelief and the evil and violence that follow. Jonah also had shared with them God's compassion and love in the coming Savior. For them as for us and for all sinners, God's compassion and love are in Christ, Jesus of Nazareth.

God did not bring his judgment down on the Ninevites because he would bring it down on Jesus, their substitute. God does not bring his judgment against our sins down on us for the same reason. God did not change his mind about judgment. God laid on Jesus Christ the iniquity of us all. The Father judged his Son in the flesh guilty instead of us. God relented and spared all who trust in him and manifest their faith by turning from our evil ways.

God accomplishes his will to save sinners through the preaching of his Word. Jonah declared God's judgment and God's compassion and forgiveness. We have had Jonahs throughout the years and have them today who preach God's Word. That Word does not ignore God's judgment against sin and unbelief in order that we do not ignore the cross. We do not ignore God's compassion and love that turns us from evil and violence because of our faith in him. Again, we dare not avoid the cross. It is on Calvary outside Jerusalem that God's love for us sinners appears in Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest.

The Epiphany facet of this gem matches Peter's words, again in his second epistle, "He (God) is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." [3:9] Jonah's mission work matches Paul's words to Timothy in his first epistle, "God our Savior wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." [2:4]

This is why we preach God's Word. The light shines to enlighten the Gentiles. God accomplishes his will to save sinners. That is how God has spared us by his compassion and love from the judgment we deserve. Amen. <SDG>