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Jonah 3:1-10 ¹
Jonah preaches to Nineveh
& they repent.
4th Sunday after Pentecost
Supplementary Lectionary Series “B,”
Old Testament

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^{3:1} Then the Word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the Message I give you.”

³ Jonah obeyed the Word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city to God—a visit required three days. ⁴ On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned!” ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When the news reached the King of Nineveh, he rose from his Throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust (ashes). ⁷ Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the King and his Nobles:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

THE PROPHET JONAH PROCLAIMS GOD’S MESSAGE ...
I. GOD’S MESSAGE OF COMING DESTRUCTION
II. GOD’S MESSAGE WHICH WORKS REPENTANCE
III. GOD’S MESSAGE WHICH BRINGS DELIVERANCE

In the Name of Jesus who brings to us his Word so that we may repent, believe and be saved,
Dear Fellow-Redeemed,

When we think of the Old Testament Prophet Jonah, we usually think of that person who was swallowed by a big fish – not a whale – swallowed by a big fish, and three days later was spit up on shore. We sometimes forget why that happened to Jonah.

¹ *The New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984. All Scripture references are taken from this translation unless noted otherwise.

The LORD commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria. The Assyrians were bitter enemies of Israel. Yet, God commanded Jonah to preach his Word to these Ninevites. Jonah did not want to go and proclaim the Word of the LORD God to these bitter enemies of Israel. Jonah did not want them to know the LORD, the God of free and faithful grace and forgiveness. So, instead of going east toward Nineveh, Jonah tried to run away.

Jonah tried to runaway. He went west. He boarded a ship headed for Tarshish in Spain. The LORD, however, was not done with Jonah.

The LORD caused to come up a raging and terrible storm at sea. The ship was in danger of sinking (1:4ff). Jonah told them that the only way they could save themselves was to throw him overboard. When the sailors finally did this, the sea immediately became calm (1:11ff). Jonah, however, was swallowed by a big fish (1:17). For three days and three nights, Jonah was in the belly of this big fish. Then, the fish vomited Jonah up on shore (2:17).

Again the Word of the LORD came to Jonah.

3:1 Then the Word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: 2 “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the Message I give you” (3:1,2).

Jonah undoubtedly remembered what had happened to him the first time he disobeyed the Word of the LORD. So, Jonah went to Nineveh as the Word of the LORD commanded him (3:3). Thus, we see that ... THE PROPHET JONAH PROCLAIMS GOD’S MESSAGE. THE PROPHET JONAH PROCLAIMS GOD’S MESSAGE ... I. GOD’S MESSAGE OF COMING DESTRUCTION; II. GOD’S MESSAGE WHICH WORKS REPENTANCE; and, III. GOD’S MESSAGE WHICH BRINGS DELIVERANCE.

THE PROPHET JONAH PROCLAIMS GOD’S MESSAGE ...
I. GOD’S MESSAGE OF COMING DESTRUCTION

Commentators estimate that the population of Nineveh during the time of Jonah was about 120,000. It would take Jonah three days to traverse the city (3:3b), stopping at various convenient points to proclaim God’s message of coming destruction. We hear the end of the message, which God gave to Jonah, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned!” (3:4b). The LORD God was going to destroy Nineveh because of its evil ways and the violence that pervaded the city.

APPROPRIATION

Oh, how we need such a preacher of the LORD today! We need such a preacher like Jonah in our nation and communities.

It should come as no surprise to you that our nation is wicked. There is irresponsibility in government. No one comes forward to take responsibility regarding the slaughter of our ambassador and other American citizens in Libya. No one comes forward to take responsibility for the Internal Revenue Service's putting pressure on certain kinds of legitimate political action groups. No one comes forward to admit responsibility for spying upon American citizens. No one admits responsibility for cell phone tapping, recording and listings. From the president on down, there is an attempt to blame someone else.

The wickedness and evil ways of our people are just like those of Nineveh, Sodom and Gomorrah. Homosexuality is defended, commended, and praised. There is unfaithfulness in marriage and divorces result; when marriages are ended, lives are shattered. There is failure to discipline children in accordance with God's Word. There is rape and murder. There is robbery and extortion. There are threats and more and more cover-ups. If you think some of this is not true, I challenge you to walk in downtown Flint or Detroit around midnight and see what happens. But then, you and I also personally need a preacher like Jonah.

How amusing it is when someone says, "I've never lied!" Yah! Right! St. Paul, quoting from the Old Testament, wrote to the Romans,

**¹² "All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one"** (cf. Psalm 14:1-3; Isaiah 53:1-3;
Ecclesiastes 7:20)

**¹³ "Their throats are open graves (cf. Psalm 5:9);
their tongues practice deceit"** (Romans 3:12,13;
cf. Psalm 140:3).

"Tongues practice deceit" – that is lying. St. Paul says that all people are guilty. It must, therefore, also apply to you and me. Shall we challenge that condemnation? The Apostle John writes,

⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.... ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him [God] out to be a liar and his Word has no place in our lives (1 John 1:8,10).

Yes, you and I too are guilty of lies, deception and cover-up. And, sometimes, we lie by not speaking the truth when we have the opportunity. Our silence can also be lying. We, along with our nation and all our society, need someone to proclaim destruction to us too. We have such a person.

Jonah speaks to us today just like he spoke to the wicked of his day in Nineveh. He speaks to you and me through the pages of Holy Scripture. Every time a true proclaimer of God's Word speaks God's Law to us, that proclaimer is speaking as if Jonah himself were speaking to us. Every time you proclaim to others God's Law, Jonah, the preacher of

the destruction of Nineveh, is still being heard through you. And, the warning you hear and the warning you give is very similar to that of Jonah's

Jonah proclaimed that destruction was coming to Nineveh: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned!" (3:4b). Destruction is certainly coming. The Last Day, Judgment Day, is coming (cf. 2 Peter 3:10,12b). All those who do not live in repentance and faith in Christ, will be destroyed. Such preaching, however, has as its objective, the working of repentance.

THE PROPHET JONAH PROCLAIMS GOD'S MESSAGE ... II. GOD'S MESSAGE WHICH WORKS REPENTANCE

How did the people of Nineveh respond to God's Message of destruction, which Jonah was bringing to them? "The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth" (3:5). Their refraining from eating and their putting on of sackcloth were signs of repentance. Sackcloth was a coarse rough cloth – itchy and uncomfortable – and it represented repentance and remorse. Fasting – not eating – and the wearing of sackcloth, were outward signs of repentance. The citizens of Nineveh were not the only ones who repented.

"When the news reached the King of Nineveh, he rose from his Throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust (ashes)" (3:6). The King was brought to repentance by Jonah's message. The King also wanted his entire Kingdom to be in repentance.

⁷ Then he [the King] issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

"By the decree of the King and his Nobles:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish" (3:7-9).

The King and his nobles and the citizens of Nineveh did not ignore the Word of God proclaimed by Jonah. They believed God's Word. They manifested, revealed, their belief in God's Word of destruction through his Prophet Jonah – they manifested their faith by the outward putting on of sackcloth, fasting and ashes; and by calling "urgently on God" to be merciful to them. The Ninevites turned from their evil ways and from their sins. Jesus himself indicates the sincerity of their repentance.

You heard Jesus state in our Gospel Lesson (Matthew 12:38-41), "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the

preaching of Jonah” (Matthew 12:41a). Jesus saw the true repentance of the Ninevites. Jesus wants to see true repentance in us.

APPROPRIATION

Jesus wants to see true repentance in us. Repentance means a turning – a turning away from sin and a turning to the LORD for forgiveness, which leads to a godly life. Another word associated with repentance is “contrition.” Contrition is terrors of conscience striking the heart. We do not work or create true repentance and contrition in ourselves.

True repentance and contrition are the work of the Holy Spirit through the Law. This work of the Holy Spirit is called his alien or foreign work. Isaiah describes it in these words, “The LORD will rise up ... he will rouse himself ... to do his work – his strange work – and perform his task – his alien task” (Isaiah 28:21); “the understanding of this message will bring sheer terror” (Isaiah 28:19b). “Sheer terror” is contrition. The “sheer terror” at eternal punishment and destruction is what contrition means. Are we contrite? Are we terrified?

Are we terrified? Or, are we complacent in the idea that, “Oh, we’re saved by grace, so we do not have to be concerned about sin anymore.” And, yet, you are still a sinner – you sin every day in your thoughts, words, actions, attitudes and behavior. Is this not true? That means that the condemnation, punishment and destruction resulting from sin, hangs over your head.

“God threatens to punish all who transgress [his] commandments.”² About what kind of punishment is God speaking?

Sometimes there is temporal punishment. The punishment of God for sinning may come in this life. Sometimes what we do and say brings punishing consequences for us in our daily lives. For sure, however, God threatens to punish us in eternity. Hell is the place for eternal punishment.

Quoting from the Old Testament Prophet Isaiah, Jesus described hell as a place “where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched’” (Mark 9:48). Elsewhere, Jesus described the punishment of hell as an eternal fire and a place of outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:41,30). Do these descriptions strike terror in your heart? No?

No! All right, then! Go ahead and do not live in contrition and repentance and see what is going to happen to you. Amen.

² Kuske, David P., *Luther’s Catechism – The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and an Exposition for Children and Adults Written in Contemporary English, 3rd Edition* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998), P. 3, cf. 121-123

What? You do not want to be left in that certainty of punishment that you deserve? Then listen to the Prophet's Message of Good News.

THE PROPHET JONAH PROCLAIMS GOD'S MESSAGE ...
III. GOD'S MESSAGE WHICH BRINGS DELIVERANCE

⁵ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When the news reached the King of Nineveh, he rose from his Throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust (ashes). ⁷ Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the King and his Nobles:

“Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish” (3:5-9).

As we heard from Jesus (Matthew 12:41a), this was sincere repentance. God saw this sincere repentance and withdrew the punishment he intended for Nineveh.

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened (3:10).

Of course, this is what God wanted from the Ninevites all along. God wanted contrition from them. He wanted them to experience “sheer terror” in their hearts at the prospect of his threatened punishment. But this would only come into their hearts by the message of the Law – which Jonah proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned!” (3:4b). With Jonah's preaching of the Law did its work, then came the proclamation of the Gospel.

In our text, we do not hear Jonah proclaiming the Gospel, but it was there. In the next chapter, Jonah says to the LORD, “I new that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity” (4:2b). The Gospel must have been part of Jonah's preaching, otherwise Jesus could not have said to the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law, “The men of Nineveh will stand up at the Judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah” (Matthew 12:41a). The Ninevites would stand on the Last Day; they would not be condemned. Those who refused to repent and believe, however, would not stand and would be condemned.

APPROPRIATION

Our gracious LORD God also wants to deliver you. The LORD God makes this clear when he says through St. Paul, “God our Savior ... wants all men [all people] to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:3b,4). The truth that our LORD God wants us to know is that, like the Ninevites, we are sinners who are rightly doomed to destruction. But our LORD God also wants us to know the truth that Jesus came into the world to take away our sins. That is the reason that our LORD God brings to us the Good News of Jesus – the Gospel. How can we believe this Gospel? How do we know that it is true?

You heard in our Gospel Lesson that the Jews were demanding a sign from Jesus (cf. Matthew 12:38). Jesus would give them a sign.

³⁹ He [Jesus] answered [them], ‘A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the Prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth’ (Matthew 12:39,40).

Jesus has given you this sign too. Jesus arose from the grave on the third day. Jesus is your crucified and risen Savior. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is your sign – your proof – that your sins have been forgiven and that, through him, you have eternal life in heaven. Thus, Jesus assures you,

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his One and Only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the Name of God’s One and Only Son” (John 3:16-18).

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (John 3:36a).

CONCLUSION

Jonah preached God’s Message to the detestable sinners in Nineveh of Assyria, and warned them of coming destruction. Jonah continues to preach this message to you today through these Scriptures. The Ninevites repented. So may also you repent and turn from sinfulness to your LORD God for forgiveness and eternal life. You have this forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus. Jesus is your crucified and risen Savior! Amen.