

January 22, 2012  
Third Sunday After Epiphany

“The Law to the Gospel”

Jonah 3:1-10; Mark 1:14-20

It really was not much of a sermon. In the original Hebrew, Jonah’s message to the people of Nineveh is only five words. In English, Jonah’s declaration is, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

As a pastor trained at one of the most first rate seminaries on the face of the planet, I have had some really smart theologians and great preachers teach me homiletics; the art of preaching. If I had presented Jonah’s sermon as my homework I’d probably in another line of work right now.

Yet, I think Jonah does fit the basic paradigm of Lutheran preaching. Both Martin Luther and C.F.W. Walther, the first president of our synod, wrote about how good preaching contains the proper balance between God’s Law and God’s Gospel. Jonah speaks both. He preaches the law in all its harshness and condemnation; “Nineveh shall be overthrown!” But the Gospel is right there with it; “Yet forty days...”

If you read the entire story of Jonah, it’s not about a giant fish, it’s about God’s mercy toward the people of Nineveh. There’s no doubt that the city is evil. The story of Jonah begins with God sending Jonah to Nineveh because, “...their evil has come up before me.” But the whole goal of God sending this reluctant prophet is that the people of Nineveh would turn from their evilness and seek God, and in seeking God find His love and mercy, His Gospel good news.

And that’s exactly what happens. God calls them through Jonah, they respond in repentance. For some strange reason the lectionary put a hole in the reading where a lot of repentance is detailed. *“And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, ‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.’”*

They react. They repent. And God does what He always does when the people He created turn back to Him as their God in repentance; God forgives.

*“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.”*

Hundreds of years later God speaks a very similar message; not through His prophet, but through Himself, His Son who has taken on human flesh. *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel.”*

Ironically, while some of the people hear and believe, others and most notably the leadership of Israel’s government and temple, reject Jesus and His message and instead of repenting, nail Him to a cross to die. Of course that’s God’s plan and God’s mercy all along. And I’m sure that some of those who railed against Christ later came to faith in Him. They repented. And God did what He always does when the people He sent Jesus to save turn back to Him as their God in repentance. God forgives.

God is all about forgiveness. He loves us although we certainly do not deserve it. He wants to forgive. He wants to forgive Nineveh so He sends Jonah. He wants to forgive the world—us included—so much that He sends His only Son to stand in for us so that His divine justice can meet out the punishment for our sin and rebellion that we deserve, but not on us; on Jesus. This is the loving, forgiving nature of God.

But I want you to take note that the story of Nineveh does not say, “Jonah called out, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ And the people of Nineveh grudgingly acknowledged that there was a God up there but kept on living as they had been in their evil and sin and God relented of the disaster that He had said He would do to them, and He did not do it.”

And I want you to take note that the very first words out of Jesus mouth in the Gospel of Mark are not, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. I’ve got some Gospel good news here, but it’s here whether you pay attention or not, so do whatever you want to do. I’m just going to go over here and die and rise and take care of things. Don’t mind me.”

There are lots of people, many who even like to wear the name “Christian”, who like the idea of God and Jesus, but kind of want to gloss over those pesky words that keep popping up in relation to the Gospel. “The people of Nineveh believed God.” Their king said, “Let everyone turn from his evil way...” Jesus Christ said, “Repent and believe...”

Jesus did die for the sins of the whole world and God’s Holy Spirit does call us to faith in that promise of God fulfilled. But God’s call necessarily requires a faithful response. The response is belief and repentance. I fear many people today hear that call of the Spirit but their only reaction is to simply make that truth another rationalization for continued sinning. “God loves me so much He sent His only Son, so that I can keep on doing whatever sinful thing I like and He’s going to save me! Thanks God! By the way, I’m not going to pray or worship or think about you much, but I expect you to be there when I need you and holding open that door of heaven for me. Bye!”

No. God’s law is still there. There is condemnation for the faithless. The law is truth. Its threat should drive us to despair and then to those words; repentance, belief. Not a grudging acknowledgement, but a turning from sin to God in fear toward the reception of His hope, mercy and forgiveness.

Luther puts it this way in the Smalcald Articles, “This is really what it means to begin true repentance. Here a person must listen to a judgment such as this: ‘You are all of no account—whether you appear publicly to be sinners or saints. You must all become something different from what you are now and act in a different way, no matter who you are now and what you do. You may be as great, wise, powerful, and holy as you could want, but here no one is righteous, etc. To this office of the law, however, the New Testament immediately adds the consoling promise of grace through the Gospel.’”

I guess that’s why Jonah’s sermon is actually so good. “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” It crushes people with the law, with certain condemnation, but it also screams that there is time to react to the message, but reaction must happen.

We don’t know how many days are left, so no matter how much some folks might like it, I can’t preach that short. But I want to make one thing as crystal clear as Jonah. Condemnation is a fact. Judgment against sin is a reality. Those who hear Jesus cry “Repent and believe the Gospel” and do not turn to Him as that Gospel promise become reality for them to bear their sin; they are choosing to bear that sin themselves and face God the last day still holding it on their shoulders.

Be scared of this. Be fearful and turn from your sins to God's Christ. Nineveh's King said, "*Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.*" The Gospel is that we know! God will relent and turn from His fierce anger! The Gospel is us knowing that God's anger for sin has already been directed at His Son on the cross! We stand already forgiven in Christ, under the reign of His kingdom and righteous on the day of judgment! This is faith. And faith is a reaction to God's call. Faith is repentance. Faith is turning from sin to the sweet forgiveness available from God in His Word, His Baptism, His Holy Supper.

So no, I won't be preaching shorter just because Jonah's five words worked so well. I will keep speaking God's Word in as many words as it takes, because it is the call of God to His beloved creation through which the Holy Spirit works faith. I hope I always echo the scary words of Jonah and of Jesus; Repent! Turn! Don't follow that sinful direction! I hope and pray that it works a fearful turning to God, so that His Gospel good news forgiveness washes over you daily until that day we are made perfect in His righteousness forevermore.

Amen.