

Jonah 3:1-5,10

Epiphany 3B + January 25, 2012
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The Lord Relents

The Word of the Lord from Jonah 3:10: "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." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Does God change His mind? Does He go back on what He says? Some would use our Old Testament lesson as proof that God doesn't always follow through on His Word. After all, He sent the prophet Jonah to declare to the people of Nineveh that they would be destroyed because of their wickedness. Once Jonah ran away and was returned to the task via a great fish, Jonah went and declared God's impending wrath. Then the people repented, and the Lord relented. He did not do what He said He would do.

Well, good for Nineveh. But it is good for you? Some would use this to argue that God is unreliable and so your faith isn't built on anything sure. If God didn't do what He said He'd do to Nineveh, how can you be sure that He will do what He says to you? After all, He says to you, "I forgive you all of your sins for the sake of Jesus." He says, "Heaven is yours because My Son sacrificed Himself on the cross for your sins." But could God relent again—could He change His mind and not do for you what He has said He will do? What are the chances that God would relent of forgiving you for your sins?

There is absolutely no chance that God will change His mind, because His Son has indeed shed His blood for your redemption. But more to the point, God has never acted unreliably in the first place. Our Old Testament lesson is, in fact, one more example of preaching Law and Gospel correctly.

Remember, the Law of God declares that the wages of sin is death, while the Gospel declares that Christ has died that death for the sins of the world. The Law is for those who need to repent. The Gospel is for those who are repentant. You don't preach the Law to those who are repentant of their sin, because they're already convicted by the Law and ready for forgiveness. You don't preach the Gospel to those who aren't repentant, because they're not ready for forgiveness yet.

From Genesis on, God proclaims Law and Gospel both. He declares that those who are sinful will die for their sin. To those who repent, He declares that He forgives them for the sake of Christ.

When Jonah goes to Nineveh, there's no repentance there: there is only sin and idolatry and wickedness. Because there is no repentance, Jonah preaches no Gospel. He only preaches the Law: He proclaims, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." This is absolutely true: the wages of sin is death, and death is going to come to the Ninevites. Where there is no repentance, only judgment awaits: in this case, that judgment is coming in 40 days.

But the people of Nineveh repent. They hear God's Word of judgment, and they believe it. They call for a fast and they put on sackcloth as they mourn their sins. Even the king hears and believes: he repents of his sin, and calls for the people to turn away from wickedness and call out to God for mercy. They repent. They confess their sins.

And what does God do? "If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness," says 1 John 1:9. Because the Ninevites repent, God forgives

them and doesn't destroy them. He relents from destruction because He has always said that He will forgive those who repent.

This story in no way teaches that God is unreliable or fickle or untrustworthy. It demonstrates once again that God is faithful in what He says. In His Law, He says to you, "Because you are a sinner, you will die for your sin." But in His Gospel, He says, "I forgive you for Jesus' sake." If you remain in sin and refuse to repent, then God will faithfully follow through on His Law, as promised. If you repent, then God will faithfully follow through on His Gospel, as promised. If you reject that gift of grace, then you've abandoned the faith and God will faithfully follow through on His Law, as promised; and if you repent again, He will faithfully forgive again. Thus, when you hear this text from Jonah, you're not rattled or unsure of God's mercy; you're all the more comforted that the Lord is always faithful.

Not only that, but this text teaches you much about the kingdom of God. In our Gospel lesson this week (Mark 1:14-20), Jesus begins to preach that the kingdom of God is at hand. Those who hear Him say this will interpret it in different ways. There are many who are hoping to overthrow Rome's hold on Judea, and so they're hoping that Jesus comes to raise up an army and replace Caesar. Likewise, folks like King Herod will perceive this as a potential threat, thinking that a new king has arrived on scene, and He'll want to create His kingdom by robbing them of land and subjects. But Jesus hasn't come to set up a kingdom on earth, or to compete with Herod and Caesar for people and land. He has come to bring people into the kingdom of heaven by the forgiveness of sins. He's no threat or competition: even though He is the Lord who has given Herod and Caesar their authority to rule, He doesn't interfere with them. Instead, He offers salvation to their citizens—and He tells those citizens to obey their rulers even as they trust in God.

So Jesus hasn't come to compete with earthly rulers and kingdoms. Nor has He come to raise up an army. On earth, kingdoms spread by force and conquest, but that isn't how Jesus will spread His kingdom. Instead, He starts calling disciples—mainly fishermen, and He calls them to speak, not fight. They are not to force anyone to follow Jesus. They are simply to tell people that Jesus has come to give them salvation.

That's how the kingdom of God spreads in the world: His people speak His Word.

That's exactly what is going on in the Old Testament lesson. In fact, it couldn't be clearer that it is the Lord at work.

For one thing, Nineveh is big. It's a three-day walk across the city, and one man is sent to call the whole city to repentance. There's no Twitter feed or nightly news for rallying the people together. If this message is going to spread, it's going to spread by word of mouth; and it has to do so in forty days or less.

Nineveh has no love for God. It's well-known for its depravity and wickedness. This isn't a group of nice people who have wandered away from the faith: they're steeped in idolatry and sin.

Not only does Nineveh have no love for God, but Jonah has no love for Nineveh. He'd much rather see the city destroyed. After the people repent and God spares the city, what does Jonah angrily say to Him? He says, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee [to Tarshish]; for I knew that You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster" (Jonah 4:2).

So there you go: God sends one man to call a gigantic city full of unrepentant sinners to repentance, and the man doesn't even want to go. The only reason he preaches in Nineveh is because he doesn't want to get swallowed by a giant fish again. Yet, the people of Nineveh repent. Clearly, they don't repent because of Jonah's love, enthusiasm, charisma or desire to help. Clearly, they don't repent

because they're basically good people who were thinking that it was about time to get right with God before the prophet showed up.

So if it wasn't Jonah or the people that brought about repentance and faith, all that's left is the Lord at work in His Word.

How powerful is that Word! In this text, it is spoken by a man who doesn't want to say it to a people who don't want to hear it, and yet it brings repentance, faith and deliverance to an entire city.

This is such a comfort to the people of God as they proclaim the kingdom of God today. When you speak that Gospel to others, their repentance and faith doesn't depend on you. You need not worry if you said things well enough or convincingly enough—*just say it*; for it is the work of the Holy Spirit in that Word which brings repentance and faith and salvation. You need never despair, either, that you should stop speaking God's Word because those around you don't want to hear it or that the world is too far gone. Nineveh didn't want to hear it, either: yet when the reluctant prophet spoke, they believed.

The Lord has likewise spoken to you. He has warned you of your sin and its consequences, and He has announced to you that Christ died for your sins. He speaks forgiveness to you here, and His forgiveness is all His work, not yours. Some will tell you that you are only forgiven when you *feel* forgiven, or that you only *really* believe when you're excited about your faith. But your emotions don't make forgiveness real: the Holy Spirit gives it to you. Whether you feel it or not, it is given to you. It is a blessing to feel the comfort of forgiveness and excitement about faith, sure; but if such feelings are absent, you are still forgiven because the Lord speaks His Word to you.

Likewise, your baptism didn't save you because of the effort you put into it—and that's a great comfort if you were baptized as an infant like me. Furthermore, the Lord doesn't say, "Take and eat, this is My body if you really believe it is." It is His body because He says it is—your feelings and faith have nothing to do with it. God grant you the repentance and faith to receive His Supper worthily.

Dear friends, rejoice in the Lord and how He spreads His kingdom. It is all His doing and all by His Word. And so He has brought you into His kingdom all by the work of His Spirit, with the Word that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen