

Mt. Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

3rd Week After Epiphany

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Jonah 3:1-5 & 10

God's Word brings much needed CHANGE!

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Most of us are familiar with the Biblical account of Jonah from our earliest Sunday school days. We remember how God called Jonah to preach His Word to some foreigners, & how Jonah decided to run the very opposite direction instead. But God caused a huge storm to hit Jonah's get-away ship; & as a result, Jonah tells the sailors on that sinking ship to throw him overboard & into the sea, because he knew God brought this storm on them all

because Jonah had disobeyed the Lord's command. But then of course when they did, God in grace & mercy, saved Jonah from drowning, by having him be swallowed by a big fish; & after 3 days inside that sea creature, a *changed* Jonah was vomited up onto shore. And that's where our text for today picks up, as God uses this familiar Bible story to teach us the powerful lesson that **His Word brings much needed Change!**

We read "Then (after he was spit up) the Word of the Lord came to Jonah a 2nd time: 'GO to the great city of Nineveh & proclaim to it the message I give you.'" Jonah was again ordered by God to Nineveh - the capital city of the nation of Assyria, Israel's main enemy at this time; Nineveh is in modern day Iraq. The Assyrians were mighty warriors & cruel conquerors, who'd often torture, abuse, & kill those they captured, including the women & children. The prophet Isaiah talks about the *arrogance* of the Assyrians; & the prophet Nahum tells about the feeling of dread that all nations of that day had toward the cruel Assyrians - including Israel who was paying tribute (taxes) to Assyria at this time, since they'd already lost key battles to them. But now God was calling His prophet, Jonah, to go to Israel's biggest & cruelest enemy, the Assyrians, & preach God's Word *to them* - *to THEM?* Well, although he didn't really want to go to the capital of his nations' chief enemy, after running away the 1st time & seeing where it landed him, we're told: "Jonah obeyed ... & went."

We also hear: "Now Nineveh was a very important city - a visit required 3 days." From other evidence, scholars have concluded that there may have been half a million people living in Nineveh in this day; it was like the New York City of its day! And the people living in that large, fast paced metro setting were living openly wicked & sinful lives that were very displeasing to God, their Creator; & that shouldn't surprise us either! For the people of Assyria & Nineveh were idol worshippers; & their worship of those so-called gods included some of the most abominable practices the world has ever seen! They were living in open rebellion against God!

As Jonah arrived in Nineveh, our text tells us, "On the 1st day, Jonah started into the city; he proclaimed, '40 more days & Nineveh will be overturned.'" That Aramaic word translated as "overturned" literally means "to be overthrown from the foundations;" this is the same word used in the Bible when speaking of what happened to Sodom & Gomorrah. 'Complete destruction for Nineveh & its residents is coming in a month & a half' was God's message through Jonah; yes, because of the openly sinful lifestyle of the Ninevites, which showed no respect for God at all, they were going to be wiped off the face of the world in 40 days, IF they didn't repent & change their ways ASAP. They'd been warned!

Jonah was called by God to preach God's Law to those people who were mindlessly wandering the very highway to hell, distracted by their comfortable life & routine in the big city, apart from a relationship with the only true God that there is; & that warning was amazing love from God—underserved love: grace! Grace is why God sent Jonah to Nineveh to begin with; for God doesn't want to see anyone perish, but all to come to repent! As God's Law warning was preached there by Jonah, the Holy Spirit was busy doing His heart-changing work. Through that Word of God preached by Jonah, proud, arrogant, calloused hearts of stone were smashed with God's law; they were shown that their idolatrous worship & wicked ways were nothing to be proud of - for they were an open violation to the will of the living God - & God hates & promises to punish all who continue to rebel against Him & His commands - not only here & now, but also eternally in the fires of hell!

And that Word of God - that preaching of God's Law, *does* bring change; in fact, it is the only thing that brings real change to people's heads & hearts, which are the headwater sources from which all actions flow! In this case we're told that the Ninevites 'believed God,' & His Word brought to them by Jonah; & what comes next from them, we'd call *repentance*. Not only did they just say, "We're sorry," but they also showed proof or fruits of their repentance, as they fasted (stopped eating for a time), & put on sackcloth - both of which were ancient customs showing humble sorrow & genuine mourning. Yes, the Ninevites' sinful hearts, which had been broken up with the plow of God's law & softened with the grace of God showered on them in this warning, were led to God to cry out in prayer for mercy; & for a time, those hearts that were changed by the work of the Spirit in God's Word, even brought forth a *change in actions* - away from their sinful ways as well!

Friends, **God's Word brings change** – the change that's still very much needed today! Many people feel that God's Law needs to be toned down or completely done away with in today's world & churches; for people don't *like* being told that what they're doing is wrong – it brings them down! So the conventional wisdom of today's world says that we should just *encourage* people to *consider* different paths than the sinful ones they may be walking, & then we just have to *try to accept them for who they are*, even if they choose to stay on that path to their own destruction. But is that what **God** really wants us to do - is that what He sent Jonah to Nineveh to do? Do we hear Jonah saying, "You people can do whatever you want – but just be sincere about it & God will be pleased"? Or does Jonah play the game like so many today do, saying, 'That's not the choice I would have personally made – but I can't tell you your choice is wrong if it's right for you'? **No way!!** Jonah was sent to Nineveh with God's message of absolute truth; & that includes an honest preaching of God's Law standard, to wake up & warn sinners when the path of defiance of God they are walking on is leading to their eventual eternal destruction!

So also *we* need to keep on sharing the message of God's Law with people today too; for only God's law brings about the *change* of heart needed to rescue a sinner from the death-trap of Satan that they're ensnared in! Only the Holy Spirit working in that preaching of God's Law can convict people of their sin, & show them how God feels about it & what He will do to those who continue in it. Only the Holy Spirit working in the message of God's truth can work real repentance in human hearts, which will then drop the self-centered sinner on their knees in prayer to God for His saving mercy, as we see happened in these Ninevites. Such Spirit-wrought repentance is the change that is needed to prepare people for what comes next, which is God's good news message about His Son, Jesus, the world's Savior from sin. But if we forget about sharing God's Law 1st, then people aren't going to see their great **need** for that Savior any more than a healthy person sees the need for visiting a doctor. That's why we, as members of God's church & His representatives here on earth, we must all continue to share God's Law in loving concern with those breaking it; for only God's law can show people their great need for a change of heart before it's too late! Only God's Word can bring about the *true change* needed.

So what happened after God's Law showed these Ninevites their need for change & they repented? Our text says, "When God saw what they did & how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion on them & did not bring upon them the destruction He'd threatened." That's pure gospel grace on the part of God. God didn't want to see those Assyrians end up in Hell & suffer the eternal consequences of their sins there. So He sent them a prophet to speak God's truth to them - God's Law which convicts & condemns, in preparation for the good news of the gospel which says that God, for the sake of the Savior He promised to send, has forgiven all sin; & that forgiving grace of God in the gospel also led God to announce the immediate blessing on their God-pleasing change of heart in repentance - that they weren't going to be wiped out in 40 days as God warned! That Gospel message of God's forgiving grace also motivated the Ninevites to put aside their wicked deeds & to bring forth *changed actions* – sweet fruits of a budding faith that are pleasing to God & result in His blessing! Yes the gospel message assured those Ninevites that their status before God had graciously been changed for the sake of the coming Savior & His work - that their sins were all forgiven in Jesus' perfect life & death, just as our sins are all forgiven in Jesus! Yes, God's Word does bring **change**, my friends – the only true change that can not only adjust the *outward actions* of the moment, but more importantly can truly change *the heart* inside for the long term, so a **new** life under God can begin to grow where before only self-centered sinfulness ruled!

Yes, God's Word of law & gospel bring about the needed change in people's sin sick hearts. Jonah knew the power of God's Word; & it's clear from the entire book of Jonah that that's why he really didn't want to go & preach it to *Israel's enemies*, the Assyrians! For whatever reasons, Jonah didn't think they deserved God's saving truth; but our gracious God had other ideas. God wants **all** to be changed from their natural state as sinners who deserve eternal condemnation into His forgiven children headed for Heaven through Jesus' work! But the only way for that powerful change to happen is through the sharing of God's Word – all of it, in both law & gospel. May we always be willing witnesses of Christ to **all** people! And as we're tempted to be like Jonah, as we find ourselves thinking about running away because we don't want to share God's truth with others (for we don't think they're worthy of it, or it's too uncomfortable for us to point out someone's sin, or the world is telling us we should simply stay out of it & 'live & let live,' or whatever lie Satan is whispering in our ear at that moment so he can keep that lost soul in his devilish clutches!), may God turn *us* around as he did Jonah – hopefully without us having to be swallowed by a whale 1st; & may He point us towards that lost soul who needs their heart & life changed through the only real power that can help: the truth of God's law & gospel. Trust that message you've been given; it really does bring change - change that works eternal results! Amen.