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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
January 24, 2021
Epiphany 3

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, our first reading for this morning consists of a passage from the story of Jonah.

And the story of Jonah is THE great comedic work in the Bible.

There other humorous texts in the Bible. But Jonah really takes the cake.

It is a story that intends for us to laugh and to laugh some more.

And probably the part we remember best about the story is the whale, or great fish that swallowed Jonah.

When Jonah refuses to go Nineveh and proclaim God's Word, Jonah heads out in the opposite direction by ship.

But God will have none of it.

God sends a storm to engulf the ship and Jonah is cast into the sea.

And a great fish comes along and swallows Jonah. And the fish swims back toward Nineveh.

Jonah is in the belly of the fish for 3 days, until the fish spews him up on dry land.

This is where then our first reading picks up the story.

Jonah goes to Nineveh, which we are told is exceedingly enormous, such that it takes three days to walk across.

Jonah walks an entire day into the city and begins to preach.

And he preaches the best sermon ever preached by a human being.

It is short. It is to the point. And it completely persuades the people of Nineveh to change their way of living.

Imagine if your pastor could preach like that.

Jonah says, “Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

That is all Jonah says.

“Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

And what happens?

The text says, “The people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.”

And if we didn’t know, sackcloth is the equivalent of burlap, which when one wears against one’s skin proves to be terribly itchy and uncomfortable.

Fasting and wearing sackcloth are sign of repentance.

Even the King, we are told, put on sackcloth and sat in ashes, which also was quite uncomfortable.

And the King declared that everyone in Nineveh was to fast, to not eat nor drink, and everyone was to wear sackcloth.

Even the animals in Nineveh were to be covered in sackcloth.

And all I can envision is all these animals walking around itchy.

Goats, cats, dogs, all trying to scratch their backs against a wall or pillar, you name it.

I envision this scene and all I can do is laugh.

And, so because of Jonah’s amazing sermon which is but one sentence...

Because of Jonah’s astounding preaching...

All the inhabitants of Nineveh from the King to commoner to animal...

All the inhabitants of Nineveh repent of their ways.

Because the inhabitants of Nineveh repented, something unprecedented happens.

God changed God’s mind.

Because the inhabitants of Nineveh—man, woman, child, and animal—repented, God changed God’s mind.

Did we see that?

Because the Ninevites fasted and because they put on sackcloth...God did not bring about the calamity God had said he would bring upon them.

You may still not be getting what I am saying, so let me break it down for us.

Because Jonah preached God's Word to Nineveh...

And because God's Word enter the hearts of the people and animals living in Nineveh...

And because these inhabitants of Nineveh then responded faithfully by showing acts of contrition, because they repented...

...God changed God's mind.

God changed God's mind.

Again, I don't know if we understand how unprecedented this is—that God changed God's mind.

In the Old Testament, when God spoke his word to the prophet, and the prophet proclaimed God's word of wrath and judgement to God's people, well there was nothing anyone could do.

God's Word was already out there.

It is like the scene from the movie *When Harry Met Sally*.

When Harry makes a pass at Sally, and she is affronted that Harry would make a pass at her when Harry is dating Sally's girlfriend.

So Harry says... "I take it back. Ok? I take it back."

"You can't take it back," Sally responds.

"Why not?"

"Because it is already out there."

"What are we supposed to do? Call the cops, it is already out there."

"Just let it lie."

Yes, the Old Testament theology believed that once God's Word was out there it couldn't be retrieved. It couldn't be retracted. It would fulfill what it had stated.

And, Jonah had just prophesied God's Word to the Ninevites, "Forty more days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown."

But then the Ninevites, including all the animals, repent of their evil ways.

And God changed God's mind, such that the calamity that he had said he would bring upon the Ninevites, he did not do.

PAUSE

Now, sisters and brothers in Christ, you and I, we change our minds all the time.

I think I will wear that cable knit sweater today.

On second thought, I think I will put my flannel shirt on instead.

You know I have really been craving a burger. I think that is what I will make for dinner.

But you know what, now that I am thinking about it, a salad would be a healthier decision.

I think I will spend the day reading that new book I have been wanting to get into.

Scratch that, it is such a nice day out, I think I will go for a walk.

Yes, you and I change our minds all the time, and it is no big deal.

But for God to change God's mind, well that creates theological challenges.

Why would God change God's mind, if God knows all things?

If God is all powerful, how is it that God can be influenced, can be swayed, by our actions, so as to change God's mind?

These are the great questions, and then some, that theologians struggle with when we read that God changed God's mind.

God is supposed to immutable, unchanging, eternally the same.

What does it say about God that God changes God mind?

For me, it says that God is deeply engaged in relationship with us, and as there are ebbs and flows in relationships, as there are moments of ups and downs in relationships, as relationship evolve so to do the parties in a relationship change.

And that is a good thing.

God changes God's mind.

But God changes God's mind, because the people of Nineveh have changed their former ways.

God changes God's mind, because the people have changed.

God is in relationship with these people, the Ninevites, and so God is willing to change so that God's grace may abound.

PAUSE

Sisters and brothers in Christ, in this present day, we are not so different from the Ninevites.

For we, too, are a people experiencing a time of great change.

With the rollout of the vaccine, we are just beginning so we hope to emerge from this worldwide pandemic.

We are just beginning we hope to get back to some normalcy of life.

We are just beginning so we hope to reboot our economy, to travel again, to dine out again, to gather again.

We are just beginning as well to understand more keenly the racial tensions that are deeply rooted in our country.

We are just beginning to see how much we are being pulled and stretched this way and that.

We are just beginning to see the enormous changes by which we are all bombarded.

PAUSE

Now, on top of everything else, we have just inaugurated a new president.

The pivotal time when a new president and a new administration comes to power, is a profound time of change, all the more highlighted in this transition of power because of the huge issues that our country faces.

PAUSE

And, I found it telling that President Joe Biden began his inauguration day by going to church.

And he invited the members of Congress to join him, which I thought was great.

I wish President Biden, though, had gone one step further.

I wished he had also asked the citizenry of the United States to come together for prayer, whether via online church services, or temple services, or mosque services—whatever be one's style of worship.

And to those persons who don't practice a religion, I wish President Biden had simply asked them to pause for moment with the rest of us.

I wish President Biden had simply asked all of us as people to stop and to think about what it means to change our ways of living, to reform our lives, to repent in effect of our past dealings with one another, and to embrace the new day with hope, and, grace, and love.

What I am getting at is this idea of communal repentance.

Now whether Jonah in our story realized it or not, that is what God had called him to do in Nineveh.

Jonah was called to empower Nineveh towards communal repentance.

He was called to bring healing to a people.

This is the task before President Biden as he begins his administration.

He is called to bring communal healing which comes about from communal accountability, which comes about from communal repentance.

We all need to be willing to reform, to change, to repent together.

And a prime opportunity for some of that communal repentance to take place was at the time of the inauguration, in worship together.

I will continue to be interested in seeing how our nation works through this process of healing.

I will continue to be interested to see how we can turn from our former ways.

If it was me in the role of President, I might just take a page out of the playbook from the King of Nineveh.

I might just send a small swatch of burlap to each and every household in this country, as a symbolic gesture.

I might just send a small swatch of burlap so as to remind us all of our constant need to repent and turn to a new day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.