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Peace, Sun Prairie
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Epiphany 3

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

YET... TODAY

Today's emphasis – as part of this Epiphany season - is how Jesus the Messiah reveals Himself universally. Not only is He the Savior for all people, but in the Gospel Lesson we see how He begins making the arrangements to reach all people. He begins selecting disciples to train and then send out with the message of salvation to the furthest corners of the earth. Given this emphasis, it would be natural for us to approach the reading from Jonah in the same way – God's sending of Jonah to Nineveh, Jonah's initial reluctance to go there, and then the surprising reaction of the Ninevites to Jonah's preaching. Jonah's example serves well as an encouragement for us to go and proclaim the Gospel to all people.

But today, let's approach it from the other side, from the standpoint of the Ninevites. How can we be encouraged by the example of the Ninevites?

You see, Nineveh was not a kind and godly city. A major metropolis of the nation of Assyria, they were sworn enemies of Israel. They were a brutal, cruel people. Untold numbers of Israelites suffered loss and trauma at the cruel hands of the Ninevites. Perhaps even Jonah had lost a loved one who had been slaughtered or enslaved by the Ninevites. Of course, the Bible doesn't suggest that, but it would make it easy to understand why Jonah didn't want to go there and why he boarded a ship to flee as far away as possible.

You know the story of how God nearly swamped that ship with a storm, how the sailors saved their ship by tossing Jonah overboard, and then how God provided a giant fish to swallow Jonah. The fish coughed Jonah out onto the beach. Then Jonah chapter three says, *Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."*

Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

Jonah's fiery warning conjures up the memory of Sodom and Gomorrah – except those cities were destroyed without any warning.

What would you do if you were told you had forty days left? What would you do? Would you travel to see places you had always wished to see? Would you blow all your money on Packer games or treating your family to water parks in the Dells? Would you have a large party to say farewell to all your friends and family? Would you get your will and all your finances in order?

...Would you stop everything you're doing and repent? Would you stop everything to seek God's mercy?

You are in fact being called on to repent. No differently from the Ninevites. You heard Jesus call out that we should repent in the Gospel Lesson today. And Jesus has never rescinded that. In fact, you and I have not been given forty days. We have been given Today. The Bible says, *Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts*. You don't know if you will die this morning or if Jesus will return to judge the world this afternoon. You have Today.

The Ninevites responded to Jonah with a total change of demeanor. Chapter three says, *The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth*. In that ancient culture wearing sackcloth was a way of expressing repentance. Imagine a whole city, some estimate the population being about 120,000, a whole city stopping everything and seeking God's mercy.

God is not commanding us to stop fulfilling our vocations or to neglect our responsibilities. Even so, compared to the total turn-around of the Ninevites is our repentance superficial, our faith shallow, our love for God anemic, our loyalty to Him half-hearted, our priorities mixed, our holy resolve insincere? If your forty days are up *today*, what will come of you? Do not kid yourself into thinking that God is as blasé as you. He is a consuming fire. He will not be mocked.

He will not be mocked, but He does give us hope. There is an important word there in the original Hebrew text of Jonah's call to repentance. It reads like this, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." Yet forty days. That little word "yet" reveals God's heart to you. That word "yet" is the most beautiful, beautiful Gospel. That word, "Yet," is hope! God is threatening to destroy, but not just yet. Not yet. There are yet forty days.

Why does God hold off for more than a month? Why is He so reluctant? Why hasn't God already cut you and me off long ago? Why has He given us until Today? Because He is the God Peter describes as *patient with us not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*. He is the landowner in the parable of the fruitless fig tree, reluctant to chop it down just yet. He says, "Let's give it one more year." He is the Savior weeping over Jerusalem, spilling out the words between sobs, *How I have longed to gather you together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings but you were not willing*.

Jonah chapter three says, *When God saw what the Ninevites did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened*. This was His heart's desire. Jesus once said, *God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him*. So Jesus was sent to sacrifice His life on the cross to save our lives... to atone to God for our sins. His desire is that we turn away from our sin to Him for forgiveness. That's what repentance is: to turn away from our sin to Him for forgiveness.

Through faith in Jesus we are reconciled to God. No longer at odds. No more threats. No more judgment. No more punishment. Only peace. Only goodwill. Only a heavenly Father's love. Only salvation.

Perhaps there is yet a lingering concern, a niggling fear, that your repentance has been far from robust, that on a good day your repentance is at best feeble, that even as you repent your wicked desires or apathetic spirit are right there with you, that your repentance is more sham than reality. Then acknowledge *that* to your Lord. Acknowledge to Him that you aren't even capable of a true repentance by yourself. God must work real repentance in you. The Bible says, *It is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose*. Why do you think for generations a major component of our liturgy was the song, *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me?*

And as Jesus has atoned for all sins, He has even atoned for insufficient repentance by His death on the cross. And He has also promised to send you His Spirit to give you the mind of God. Jesus said, *I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.*

There you have Jesus' promise, His promise to send you His Spirit, so that you may repent and believe the good news. That promise is right now. Therefore, there is no time to waste. There is Today, there is yet Today.