

Epiphany 3 / January 21, 2024

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.”

God relents when people repent

Epiphany is a season of realization. John the Baptist realizes Jesus is the Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Nathaniel realizes that something good has come from Nazareth. He exclaims, *“Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!”* We realize the power of Jesus’ words to affect the human spirit. Jesus calls to Simon, Andrew, James and John, *“Follow me!”* They immediately leave their nets, their boats, their business and follow Him. We realize that in Jesus there is more than meets the eye. During Epiphany through word and wonder, Jesus shows Himself our Lord and our God, so we realize that He is the Saviour of the world and believe in Him as our Lord and Saviour. God relents from judgement when people repent, because with Him there is forgiveness. In Jesus we see God and in Him receive the fullness of His love in forgiveness and peace.

Our lesson from Jonah is also something of an epiphany. We see that God receives people with forgiveness when they repent of their sins and cry to Him for mercy. In the book itself, we see the power of God’s word to affect a change in the human spirit in a large group. The city of Nineveh with a population of 120,000, hear the word of the Lord, clothe themselves in the garments of repentance and call upon God for mercy. That’s amazing in itself. Even more amazing is that the God they called upon for mercy was not their deity, but the God of Israel. It would be unbelievable if it weren’t in the bible. It would be easier to believe a man was swallowed by a whale and survived.

It is a whale of a tale, but the most amazing thing about our text in particular and the book of Jonah in general, is the love of the Lord and His concern for all things living, especially the humans He formed with His hands at creation. There is nothing more incomprehensible than God’s love. Some people think the Old Testament is a book of law and judgement. There is law and judgement in all scripture. The Lord is the holy God in whose presence sin cannot abide. But there is much more than law and judgement. There is the love of God, who calls sinners to repentance and who relents and lifts His judgements when we respond in faith. The greatest epiphany we can have, is the realization of God’s great love, displayed most fully in Christ Jesus. God gave Him to suffer the consequences of our sin and pay our debt, so that in Him we would receive the pardon of forgiveness and the promise eternal life.

Jonah prophesied in the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century before Christ. He is mentioned in 2 Kings chapter 14. It says, in accordance with words of Jonah the son of Amittai, the Lord restored the borders of Israel to the Salt Sea. Good news indeed! He is unique in that he is one of a very few prophets who were called to prophecy outside the borders of Judah and Israel. He is unique in his defiance to the word of the Lord and his reluctance to preach the gospel to his assigned audience. Jonah is most well known for being swallowed by a great fish. This was his call to repentance for defying the word of the Lord and going away from Nineveh and the Lord. Jonah went to Nineveh with great reluctance. He did what he was told according to the letter of the law and nothing more. He preached only the law. His message offered no hope. He said, *“Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”* He never mentioned God’s mercy or said a word about repentance. His message was simply, ‘You’re going to hell!’

Some people believe that is the essence of the Christian message. Some people think there is no point turning to God. Their sins are great and lifelong. They think, ‘It’s too late! There’s no hope!’ Sometimes Christians give people the impression that they are beyond any hope of salvation. Sometimes Christians simply tell people, ‘You’re going to hell.’ Sometimes Christians tell people God hates them! That was the essence of Jonah’s message to Nineveh. ‘God hates you! I hate you. Forty days and the fireworks begin.’ When he finished his work according to the letter of the law, he went outside city and waited for the fireworks to begin. But to his shock and surprise, there were no fireworks. The people repented of their sins.

The king called for a fast and ordered man and beast to be clothed with sackcloth, the universal garment of repentance. *“God relented of the disaster that He said He would do to them, and He did not do it.”* He did not do it, because He didn’t want it in the first place. In Ezekiel chapter thirty-three the Lord says, *“I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.”* Nineveh repented and the Lord relented

of the disaster He had threatened. He did not do it, because God is merciful and forgiving. He desires not the death of sinners. He desires that we would turn from sin and turn to Him for forgiveness and healing. To that end, He gave Christ to be our Saviour. In Him we receive the pardon of forgiveness and the judgement of eternal life in His presence.

The book of Jonah affirms the Lord as God of all peoples. It expresses His concern for His human creation and all creatures. In the fourth chapter the Lord says to a still unrepentant prophet, “*Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons...and also much cattle?*” The book of Jonah and our text show the power of God’s word to accomplish His saving purpose, even when its intent is undermined by the person speaking it. Jonah did not speak a single word of repentance, only judgement. Nevertheless, the Spirit worked repentance in the heart of the king and people of the city. It is as the Lord said to Isaiah, “*The word that goes forth from my mouth will not return to me empty. It will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*” The Lord sends His word to touch our hearts, bring them to repentance and open them to receive His grace in forgiveness, pardon and peace for the sake of Jesus our Saviour.

The book of Jonah is an indictment of the people of Israel in ancient times and upon the Christian Church today, whenever we limit God’s love to ourselves. The book ends with a question to the prophet and to all God’s people. God asks, “*Should I not pity Nineveh?*” Israel in the ancient world was to be a missionary church bringing the light of God’s love to the nations. There wasn’t much light or love in Jonah’s message. No pity for Nineveh. God had to drag him to Nineveh, kicking and screaming, covered with gastrointestinal fluid. The Christian church is to be a missionary church, bringing the fullness of the light of God’s love to the nations by making Jesus known as the Saviour of all people. The Church on earth speaks a message of judgement on sin, our sin and the world’s sin. Yet God has pity on the world. The church on earth proclaims a gospel of forgiveness, the promise of God’s love for all who turn to Him in repentance. God loves the world so much He gave Jesus to be its Saviour.

Repentance is not just about other people, its about us too. We turn to God in repentance each time we confess our sins in worship and in our hearts. Repentance is not about judgement. It is to receive grace. The prophet Hosea sang, “*Come let us return to the Lord; for He has torn us that He may heal us; He has struck us down and He will bind us up.*” We return to the Lord in repentance every time we remember the promise of our baptism. In baptism God promised to hear, heal and forgive. Whenever we turn, which is what repentance means, God forgives. We call people to Christ, so that they too may receive forgiveness, be healed in their spirits and live. In Christ, God has shown the fullness of His heart of love. God does not treat us in the church or others not in the church, as our sins deserve. Nineveh’s repentance reflects God’s desire that all people come to the knowledge of salvation. God is kind and merciful. With Him is the call to repentance. With Him there is forgiveness for the sake of Christ Jesus.

Epiphany is a season of realization. Of all the epiphanies we can have, none is greater than realizing the love God has for us and for all people for the sake of Christ our Saviour. God open our hearts to believe and our mouths to speak His great love in Christ Jesus. In His Name. Amen.