

Epiphany 3B (1/25/09 – *Jesus – Revealed as the Healer of the Nations*)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

Dear saints in our Lord Jesus Christ! There are some “troubling” – at least some “curious” and “attention getting” – things in the Holy Scriptures appointed for this *Third Sunday after the Epiphany* ... not in the *Holy Gospel Lesson*, but in the *Old Testament* and *Epistle*. In our *Old Testament Lesson* from JONAH (3.1-5, 10), we hear God’s ominous word against the Ninevites (through His once reluctant but now obedient prophet): ***Yet forty days, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!*** [3.4] This was, of course, a stern warning to the Ninevites – a harsh preaching of the Law designed to grab their attention and cause them to reconsider their sinful ways and turn to the only true God. It was, really, a call to repentance. It was – in a sense – not much different from the word of our Lord as He began in earnest His public ministry after John’s imprisonment: ***The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; REPENT and believe in the Gospel*** [Mk 1.14].

And God’s Word through Jonah had its desired effect – the people of Ninevah repented. Our text says that ***the people of Ninevah believed God. They call for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.*** [3.5] Which is to say, they set aside time for spiritual contemplation of the things of God – that’s what it means to fast ... that was (and is) the purpose of fasting: foregoing meal preparation, eating, and cleanup (usually between sunup and sundown) so that one may dedicate that time to God (and also to learn that: ***Man does not live by bread alone, but from every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God*** [MT 4.4]). In particular, the people recognized their sinfulness, and put on sackcloth as a sign of that repentance. Sometimes our Lord speaks of people ***sitting in sackcloth and ashes*** [LK 10.13] – it was not only a denial of the comforts of the sinful flesh, but also a recognition of what we remember on *Ash Wednesday*: namely, that (as the Scripture says) we are dust, and to dust we shall return [GEN 3.19]. Everyone was involved – even the animals according to the verses we skipped over. God’s Word does not return to Him void, but accomplishes that for which He sends it [ISA 55.11].

And then our text says this: ***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.*** [3.10] The NIV translates this way: ***He HAD COMPASSION and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened.*** Actually – for all the NIV’s shortcomings – that translation best gets at what the original is saying. The word translated ***relented*** or ***had compassion*** originally meant ‘to sigh deeply’. It could be used to speak of the soul groaning because of the heavy load (of sin) – and is sometimes translated ‘repent’. It also means ‘to comfort oneself’ or ‘to be comforted’. When referring to people, it beautifully

communicates what repentance is: namely, first the deep, soul-groaning sorrow over sin ... but then the greater comfort of the Gospel – all resulting in a total change of heart.

When used of God, though, it conveys a different sense. When used of God it is not saying so much that God is **changing** His mind or repenting about anything ... even relenting ... but that God “sighs deeply” – not from a burden recognized ... but in “relief” so to speak ... like from a burden lifted. For God does not desire to punish sinners, as He says in EZEKIEL – *As I live, says the Lord GOD, I do not desire the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?* [33.11] When the people of Ninevah turned back from their evil ways and turned to the Lord in faith, God “breathed a deep sigh of relief” we might say – He did not have to do what His justice demands: namely, destroy wickedness. Instead He could do what His loving, merciful heart **always** desires: namely, show compassion ... and withhold His hand of judgment against Ninevah’s sins.

So it is, dear Christians, that God (through Jonah ... **and** St. Paul) proclaims to you the seriousness of your sin. For *the appointed time has grown very short ... for the present form of this world is passing away* [1COR 7.29, 31]. To the married St. Paul says: *let those who have wives* (or husbands as the case may be) *live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.* [1COR 7.29–31] Now Paul is no despiser of marriage – elsewhere he highly lauds it ... and even declares that it is an icon of Christ’s relationship to the Church [EPH 5]. A husband is to love his wife and care for her like she were his own body – which she is: flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone – just as Christ has loved the Church and given Himself up to the death of the Cross on Her ... on **our** ... behalf. Wives are to be subject to their husbands as the Church is to Christ. But what Paul is saying here is this – the things of God ... the Word ... the Gospel of God ... salvation ... the kingdom of God ... the gathering together around Word and Sacrament ... **CHRIST** ... are all **more** important. The same goes for mourning and rejoicing – since we are elsewhere commanded to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice [ROM 12] ... thus showing the love of Christ to **both** our fellow members in the body of Christ **and** to those outside the Church so that they may be drawn to Christ through us. So also regarding buying goods and dealing with the world in general – Paul isn’t telling us to live like hermits out in the desert, surviving on locusts and wild honey like John ... but rather that these things are also far less important than the things of God ... than repentance and faith in the Gospel of Christ.

Yet, do we not – at various times and in various ways – place these ... sometimes even **all** of these ... **above** Christ? Do we not neglect Christ all too often? Indeed, do we not both neglect our duties as spouses **and** neglect the Gospel? Do we not seek our own rejoicing – most often in **things** ... **goods** ... dealings with the worldly and worldly things that are passing away – rather than seeking our contentment and joy in Christ and the things of God? Do we not fall into mourning ... many times over **things** – lamenting the fall of our economy ... the decline of our retirement investments ... the demise of our favorite gadget ... our inability to get the latest technology ... the frailty of our human frame? And forget to recognize the great gifts God has bestowed upon us and daily pours out into our lives – especially the Gospel? Whenever we linger in sin, it would be good to hear the voice of Jonah: *Yet forty day, and* ... you ... *shall be overthrown*.

Today Christ calls you to repentance and faith. The time is always short ... this life is always passing away. *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel*. Do not delay your repentance ... do not fail to turn back from your evil ways (whenever you fall into them). By all means fast and put on sackcloth and sit in ashes if necessary – see how vividly portrayed is the reality of the end of your sinfulness if you do not repent and believe in the Gospel! Impenitence ultimately leads to the **eternal** dust of death.

But repentance and faith, on the other hand, lead to the kingdom of God – to the consummation of all things in a good and eternally blessed end ... that will be just the beginning of the fullness of your salvation.

Today we hear the straight-forward, Law-and-Gospel preaching of our Lord Jesus Christ – and in it He is revealed as **THE** Preacher of Righteousness. Today Christ calls to you: *Follow Me*. Leave your fleeting, mundane concerns behind ... in a distant second place. Believe in the Gospel ... cling to the Gospel of Jesus Christ ... hold on to Christ and His work, His promises, His kingdom, His forgiveness, life, and salvation. Consider well your beloved Bridegroom – all He is and all He has done for you and for your eternal well-being.

For like a dutiful – ever-faithful – Husband, your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has been ... is always ... concerned about how He can “please” His Wife, the Church. He has always been concerned with how He might present us to Himself as a beautifully adorned Bride without any spot or wrinkle or blemish of sin – holy, blameless, arrayed in the white gown of purity and innocence.

Today we see *Jesus – Revealed as the Healer of the Nations* ... manifested as the One Who does all things to bring His message of repentance and faith in the saving Gospel to **all**. He used reluctant Jonah to preach to the foreign Ninevites – even causing a storm to get him overboard and a great fish to transport him to his

destination. He called Simon and Andrew, James and John – even your own pastor – to be *fishers of men* [MK 1.17] ... fishermen who cast the net of the Gospel liberally to bring into the kingdom of God as many as receive the blessed message of salvation in Christ, our bright *Epiphany* Morningstar. *Repent and believe in the Gospel.*

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. [Amen]