

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany: February 3, 2019
“God Is Always Good”

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text this morning is the Old Testament Lesson, Jonah 1.

Jonah has an interesting history, and the Book of Jonah is different from the other prophetic books. While the other books give us a bit of history on the life of the prophets, and much attention is given to the words they preached, Jonah is the opposite. We get much history about Jonah, and only one short sermon, which doesn't come until chapter three. Jonah's history gives us a great commentary on the First Petition. How is God's Name kept holy? God's name is kept holy when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we as the children of God, also lead holy lives according to it. Help us to do this dear father in heaven. Anyone who teaches or lives contrary to the Word of God, profanes the Name of God among us. Protect us from this Heavenly Father.

This is what Jesus rebukes with the disciples. They were standing in the way of children coming to hear and be in every place where Jesus was, because they figured the kids had somewhere else they should be. Jesus wanted to be with God's Children, and they wanted to be there, but the disciples decided on their own, that this is not what the church should be. Jesus has more important things to do. This is no place for kids. They are distracting, and they don't really know what's going on, and so maybe they should just go and do something else. Don't bother Jesus.

Jonah and the disciples show us a negative side to the life of the pastor. The preaching office is one that is commanded by God. It is one that serves God by going into hostile territory, and telling people they are sinners. It is to show people their sin, so that they can hear and receive the Gospel. Pastors easily fall into these two traps. They see the enormity of the task and the difficult work that lies before them. It may be to people they don't know, or who may not trust them. They know that if they speak what God says, they are not going to make any friends. On the other side, some pastors fall into redefining the office of the ministry. They turn God into this unreachable entity, and attempt to shoo any away whom they deem as unworthy. It is not about faith; it is about image. They become

defense lawyers for Jesus. They try and soften God's Law. They shade the gospel, and things get all twisted around. While pastors are specially called to be faithful publicly, each Christian is called to do this in their own vocation.

The history of these two accounts are of extreme importance. Through them we certainly see Romans 8 lived out, "***for those who love God all things work together for good.***"¹ Let us make no mistake about it. This love is not a work of man. This love is given to us, as the Spirit is poured out upon us through the waters of Holy Baptism. The sinful nature fights God and flees from Him. The Spirit regenerates dead hearts, and renews hostile minds.

There is a reason the only sign Jesus will give the Pharisees who demand a sign is the sign of Jonah. There is God and there is not God. There is God's family, and not God's family. Jonah tried to flee, and it took a miraculous event by God's Hand and water to be reborn. Jesus died with the hostility of all God's Wrath against sin bearing down on Him, was buried in the tomb, and by a miraculous event, the Right Hand of God was resurrected. By human birth, man is born outside of God. By heavenly birth, by a miraculous event and God's own Hand through His servants with water and the Word, man is born into the family of God. This miracle we beheld this morning for Amaya.

Looking back to Jonah can give us hope for our lives. We know that God does not change, it is one of His most beloved qualities. Unlike me, whose will and emotions change many times every day, God is long-suffering and stable. See how, in Jonah, God took some very bad and terrifying situations and miraculously turned them into good. The storm that threatened to send that boatload of mariners to the bottom of the sea because of Jonah's selfish sin was instantly calmed when Jonah was cast overboard and into the sea. Those men didn't die because of Jonah's sin. That's good.

We must not also forget, that Jonah, too, experienced God's mercy in that God didn't punish him and send him to a watery grave because of his sin. Instead, God ordains a great fish to swallow up Jonah in order to preserve his life and return him to repentant, saving faith. The same disciples who try and protect Jesus in our Gospel reading, will find themselves caught in a storm, in Matthew 8. They're

¹ Romans 8:28

terrified because of the ferocity of the storm they're caught in. They wake up Jesus in their terror and fright, who was napping peacefully in the aft-end of the boat, and He immediately stands up and rebukes the wind and the waves, bringing about an instantaneous flat-calm and serenity that surpasses all understanding. "Who is this man that even the wind and waves obey Him?" This Jesus is the same God who calms the storm in Jonah.

This is the same question, "Who is this man who so powerfully and effortlessly and immediately turned something so bad and terrifying into something so peaceful and good?" Brothers and sisters, that very question does reveal the sinful unbelief and doubt still prevalent in the lives of the apostles (and truthfully, in our own lives also). We have all heard, "Well, God works in mysterious ways." And in some ways, it is true. We can talk all day long about God taking bad situations and turning them into good. We love to talk about those miracles and great reversals, and we love even more when we're on the receiving end of such miracles and great reversals. We love and praise and glorify God when He saves our sorry rear-ends from whatever trouble or grief or sorrow we find ourselves in, and when He pulls us out of the fire of those horrible situations in which we have placed ourselves. We love when God comes through and works good out of our bad.

In bad times, a popular thought arises, "Why did God permit this "bad" to enter into our lives to begin with? It is the wrong question. God does not allow bad things to come, he sends them. Consider Job. The devil couldn't even find Job until God removed the protective hedge around him. I can hear your arguments, "Pastor, that's not very comforting. If God is good, how can He send bad?" Brothers and sisters in Christ, it is far more comforting to know God sends these things, which confess Him to be in charge, or at least in control of how much can actually come. If God simply just permits these things, then Satan has free reign and equal power with God. This leaves God more like a butler, left only to sweep up the pieces and clean up the devil's mess.

I think the better question really is, "Why was the trial and sorrow sent in the first place? Why was this cross given to me to bear? Why not somebody else?" Sadly, this is where a LOT of bad answers, false theologies, and rancid hypotheses come bubbling to the top! Do any of these sound familiar? Maybe God is angry with me. Perhaps He's punishing me for some bad behavior. That's what the sailors thought

with Jonah, right? It's hard to argue with their logic, because as soon as Jonah is tossed into the sea to die—to “placate” this angry God (which Jonah himself professes)—the sea goes flat and all is well again.

All too often, even Christians sadly see this as a blueprint for what they need to do when life seems to take a turn for the worse. Many a Christian who is struggling under the weight of their respective cross (or crosses) works very hard to make things right and “get themselves right” with God so that their cross of sorrow and thorn in their side might hopefully be removed from them. They work very hard to instigate and hopefully earn a great reversal of fortune from their God and Lord. “God, here’s what I’m gonna do for you.... I’ll scratch your back and grease your palm, and in return you can make this all this bad stuff go away. If you take this cross from me, I will do better. I will get my act together. I will really turn things around.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, why does God send sorrows and terrors and griefs in our lives? Why do we, who love God and hold fast to Him in faith, still have crosses to bear? That doesn't seem fair, does it? Shouldn't the unbelieving, God-hating, unfaithful schleps have to suffer and experience pain and sorrow and grief and crisis? Why do we have to suffer? We're the faithful ones! Aren't we? Well, did you ever stop to think that maybe these terrible and terrifying things have been sent to you because this is the only way God could get your attention? God had to remove the protective hedge a bit, so that you will know what is truly in your heart. Maybe you've been too busy worshipping yourself to hear God's Truth. Maybe you're not as “squeaky clean” and “firm in the faith” as you think you are!

I know that's often the case with me. I know I'm not the only one to ever come to the sad realization—to come to the sad epiphany—that it sometimes takes a tragedy to wake me up and get my priorities straightened out and in line. I know I'm not the only one to take an inventory of my worries, my concerns, and my priorities after something “bad” happens, and I'm forced to admit the ugly truth that I've been worried and concerned about all the wrong things. Our priorities get out of whack, and it can be sudden, or more likely, a little bit here and there.

I am reminded of this at the time of death or diagnoses of terminal illnesses. Some changes are made, but sadly, they seem to never last. Fear is a great motivator, but

change brought about by fear never lasts. Still...death and mortality do have a way of lining things out and shining a bright light on some pretty dark and stupid realities, putting them in proper perspective, at least temporarily. No one has EVER said from their deathbed, “Man, I wish I spent more time at the office and less time with my family. I wish I spent more time making money and less time with my loved ones. I am sure glad I missed that opportunity this week to receive God’s mercy and be in His Word. I wish I wouldn’t have communed so much.”

Here is another thought for you selfish Christians. These heart-rending crosses you’re experiencing may have nothing to do with you. They may not be for your benefit, or to get your attention, what if they are given to you for the benefit of your neighbor. You can carry them, and they cannot. Your cross may be there to wake up and turn around those in your life who are asleep in the faith and headed towards destruction. Maybe God is using you and the exercise of your faith to bring a stubborn, blind, foolish loved one of yours to saving faith. I don’t know. I don’t pretend to have an answer as to why God sends specific types of suffering. We can only know what He tells us. He speaks of these as being elements of discipline, like a child experiences from a parent. Jesus says anyone who wants to be a follower of His, must bear the cross; suffering and death. I don’t know why certain situations are turned around, while others are not.

What I do know, however, is that God is ALWAYS working all things for the good of those who love Him, just as He has said—even terrible and terrifying things. As I said, sometimes that’s the only way He can get our attention. He loves us enough to not simply ignore the things that do us harm and threaten to destroy us and our salvation. Those on the ship with Jonah were brought to saving faith BECAUSE of those terrible, terrifying storms. God got their attention! In fact, they were calling Him “Yahweh—LORD” before they tossed Jonah overboard; before the seas were made calm. It’s sad that it took such a terrifying threat of tragedy to wake them up and bring them to faith, but they were brought to faith. Thanks be to God!

It’s sad that it took getting tossed overboard and swallowed up by a great fish before Jonah realized that God loved him and ALL people, and truly desired the death of no one...even the wicked Ninevites that Jonah so despised. God gave Jonah a little whiff of hellish death so that he could better understand the far greater death and destruction that awaited Nineveh if they didn’t hear God’s Word

and repent. God got Jonah's attention. It's sad that this epiphany didn't happen until after he found himself sandwiched between the ribs of a great fish, but it happened. God got through, and worked great and wonderful things out of this. Jonah was saved, and Nineveh repented and came to faith. Thanks be to God.

Amaya joins the family of God today, and these truths become hers. There is a whole life ahead of her, and for how ever many days God has ordained for her, 1 month, 5 years, 50 years, 120 years, there is a promise given to her by Him. He has laid His hands on her will keep her going out and her coming in from this time forth and forevermore. She will have much anxiety and fear and sadness and turmoil in the days ahead, but take heart. She is born in the Kingdom that has no end. As parents, godparents, and the body of Christ, we have a wonderful opportunity and great responsibility to raise, teach, pray, encourage, and show her how to not just live in her baptismal grace, but to cherish it.

In the days and years ahead, we have days to prize. Why are you so afraid? Why do you have so much fear and anxiety? Do you not believe that God is in complete control? You say you believe it. You boldly profess it, so...what's the problem?

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Look right here. Look at the cross. It doesn't get more terrible and terrifying than this, does it? "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?!" And yet...even in this darkest and most terrifying moment in all of human history, Christ remains faithful. He never loses faith or even slightly wavers in the faith. God remains His God. Jesus entrusts His body, His soul, and all things to His heavenly Father, trusting whole-heartedly—from the cross; from the very depths of hellish despair and tumult—that His Father is in complete control, and He is working all things for His good and for the good of all those who love Him. Here on this cross, at the most dark and terrifying moment in all of history, is God's good love and mercy and grace for you! It is finished, once and for all! Jesus triumphantly declares this, and then peacefully breathes His last and surrenders His spirit into His Father's loving hands.

Let that sink in for a moment. Yes, life probably isn't shaking out for you the way you planned or imagined. For some, it may not be that bad...right now, but there's ALWAYS something to complain about. There's ALWAYS something to worry about and fret over and stress about. There's ALWAYS something that will direct

your attention and your trust away from your God and Lord. There's always some gust; some wave in life that will blow you off-track and get you turned around and wandering away from your Lord's outstretched arms. And tragedy will hit. It always hits. Death and taxes, right?

My hope and prayer, though, is that it doesn't require a tragedy to get your faith and your priorities lined out and back on-track. I hope and pray that the light and life of Christ's cross ever and always is at the forefront of all you say, think, and do. Here is Christ! Here is your peace that surpasses all understanding. Here is your peace in the midst of this storm-tossed sea we call life. Here is the Lord of Life, holding out to you His unconditional gifts of love and peace and grace and mercy. He still speaks. His voice still penetrates the darkness and the fear and chaos and bespeaks peace. It is finished! You are forgiven. You belong to Him. You bear His name upon your head and your heart, marking you as one who has been redeemed by Christ the Crucified. You are a baptized child of God, and so shall you stand without fear before the judgment seat of Christ. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

**Prayer of the Church
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
3 February 2019**

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

Brief silence

For the Holy Church on earth, that all who seek refuge from the many storms they encounter in this sinful world would find refuge in her, and that all her children would never cease giving thanks to the Lord, whose steadfast love endures forever, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For the Office of the Holy Ministry, that all who are called to serve in Christ's stead and by His command would be strengthened to carry out their duties, especially when tempted to be reluctant and doubtful about what they are called to do, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For all Christians who are experiencing difficult times of trial and temptation, that they would be comforted by our Lord's gracious promises revealed to us in His Word, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For our congregation, that we would love one another as Christ has loved us, and that we would generously support the mission and ministry done among us and throughout the world, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For all those who have been placed in authority over us, that they would always have the common welfare of all in mind as they govern, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those who celebrate another year of earthly life, especially His servant *David* that God would cause her to grow in wisdom and grace, and that she would be strengthened to trust in God's goodness all the days of her life; let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For the sick and suffering, [*especially Larry, Phillip, and those we name in our hearts,*] that they would cry to the Lord in their trouble and be delivered from their distress, according to His will, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those who come to the table of our Lord today, that receiving Christ's very body and blood, they would be strengthened and preserved in the true faith unto life everlasting, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For all the saints who have gone before us, and now rest from their labors, [*especially Rowene*] let us give thanks to the Lord, that we would be kept in holy communion with them until our Lord returns in great glory on the Last Day, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy, through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. **Amen.**