

Ash Wednesday

Hymns: 4, 297, 304, 149

(omit Gloria, responses before & after the Gospel reading, and other ascriptions of praise during Lent.)

PSALM 6 (Matins) — PSALM 51 (Vespers)

The INTROIT of the DAY

P: I will cry unto God Most High:

C: unto God that performeth all things for me.

P: Yea, in the shadow of Thy wings will I make my refuge:

C: until these calamities be overpast.

P: Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me:

C: for my soul trusteth in Thee.

The COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that Thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent, create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of Thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Jonah 3:1-10 (NKJV)

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying,

Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

The GRADUAL

P: Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me:

C: for my soul trusteth in Thee.

P: He shall send from heaven:

C: and save me from the reproach of him that would swallow me up.

The EPISTLE

Joel 2:12-19 (NKJV)

“Now, therefore,” says the LORD, “Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, And leave a blessing behind Him; A grain offering and a drink offering For the LORD your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly; Gather the people, Sanctify the congregation, Assemble the elders, Gather the children and nursing babes; Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, And the bride from her dressing room. Let the priests, who minister to the LORD, Weep between the porch and the altar; Let them say, “Spare Your people, O LORD, And do not give Your heritage to reproach, That the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’” Then the LORD will be zealous for His land, And pity His people. The LORD will answer and say to His people, “Behold, I will send you grain and new wine and oil, And you will be satisfied by them; I will no longer make you a reproach among the nations.

The TRACT

P: O Lord, deal not with us after our sins:

C: nor reward us according to our iniquities.

P: O Lord, remember not against us former iniquities:

C: let Thy tender mercies speedily come to us, for we are brought very low.

P: Help us, O God of our salvation:

C: for the glory of Thy name.

The HOLY GOSPEL

St. Matthew 6:16-21 (NKJV)

Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian kingdom, and the residence of the great kings of Assyria, which was built by Nimrod according to Genesis 10:11, and by Ninus, the mythical founder of the Assyrian Empire, according to the Greek and Roman authors, is repeatedly called “the great city” in this book (Chapter iii:2, 3, iv. 11), and its size is given as three days’ journey (ch. iii. 3). This agrees with the statements of classical writers, according to whom *Ninos*, *Ninus*, as Greeks and Romans call it, was the largest city in the world at that time. According to Strabo (xvi 1, 3), it was much larger than Babylon, and was situated in a plain, *’Atourias*, of Assyria, i.e. on the left bank of the Tigris. According to Ctesias (in Diod. ii. 3), its circumference was as much as 480 stadia, i.e. 12 geographical miles; whereas, according to Strabo, the circumference of the wall of Babylon was not more than 365 stadia. These statements have been confirmed by modern excavations upon the spot.

- - Keil-Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume 10, Minor Prophets, pp. 389-390.

Jonah 3:1-10 — “Preach to it the Message That I Tell You”

INTRODUCTION

I. PREACH TO IT THE MESSAGE THAT I TELL YOU

II. AND THE MEN OF NINEVEH BELIEVED IN GOD

III. AND GOD RELENTED

CONCLUSION

Jonah 3:1-10 — “Preach to it the Message That I Tell You”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you all from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Tonight is Ash Wednesday, and the appointed reading of the Old Testament is Jonah 3:1-10:

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying,

Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

“Now came to be the Word of Yahweh to Jonah the second time to say.” Yes, this is the second time that Jesus came to Jonah to ordain him as an apostle to the Gentiles. At the beginning of the book of Jonah we hear:

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.”

Such is the good and gracious will of the LORD our God. He does not desire that anyone from any race or tongue, no matter how that person or group has turned from Him, should perish in sin and unbelief.

I. PREACH TO IT THE MESSAGE THAT I TELL YOU

Therefore the Scriptures are full of examples of how the LORD has called witnesses to live before the world and to preach the Gospel of repentance unto salvation. When Adam fell into sin and heard the promise of the Seed, his next response was to bless his wife and family by changing her name from Woman, which means of Man, to Eve, which means Life. Noah was set apart to preach for 120 years while the Ark was being constructed. Abraham was set apart to be the father of the people from whom the Savior would be born and reconciliation with God would be accomplished. The message has been the same message from the very beginning of the need for the message, even from eternity. God desires for us all to live in His grace, mercy, and peace.

But we humans do not listen. We turn aside from the way that the LORD has established for our good. We insist that knowing Good is not enough, and so we seek to know both Good and Evil. God tells us what is good, but we insist that we must find out for ourselves. So we trespass beyond the boundaries that the LORD has established. Then, when we find that things are not as they should be, we try to make things right by many different ways. When we fail we try to cover it up by blaming others and by finding what is wrong in others and even by hating others. But turning away from our own corrupt and evil efforts is something that we refuse to do. We keep going forward, trying to make the best of things and hoping that will be enough.

Therefore the LORD established His called out ones, His Church on earth. He calls out certain ones to be His preachers so that the Church continues in His Word and so that His Word remains in the world for all who will be saved. His Word is sharper than a two-edged sword, cutting to the heart and striking down all that stands in the way. The Law side of His Word slices and dices and kills so that the Gospel side of His Word may call, gather, restore, and make alive.

This is the Word that came to Jonah and ordained him as an apostle to the people of Nineveh. **“Now came to be the Word of Yahweh to Jonah the second time to say, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.””**

The LORD had a Word to be preached to the great city of Nineveh. Nineveh was the leading city of the world. It was the largest city known to man. Its influence reached throughout the world. Its wickedness and rebellion against God had been carried far and wide. This message was a message of power. Jonah knew the power of God’s Word to convert sinners. This message would not stop with Nineveh. It would be heard throughout the world. This was the plan of God’s everlasting mercy. Jonah knew this.

II. AND THE MEN OF NINEVEH BELIEVED IN GOD

So why did Jonah resist the call of God? Why did Jonah refuse to go to Nineveh as the LORD had ordained him to do?

Why does any group that claims to be the true representatives of the LORD resist God’s desire for all to be counted as equal recipients of God’s mercy? Why does any denomination become jealous when outsiders begin to respond to the LORD’s call to repent and believe the Gospel? Among the many reasons are loss of control, loss of power, and loss of status. There are many reasons, not to leave out pride.

In Jonah's situation, were his people, the people of Israel, any better than the people of Nineveh? What would happen if the great city of Nineveh suddenly repented while Israel continued in their idolatry and sin? What did the Word of God say when He came to be in the towns of Israel to whom He had been incarnated, but they received Him not? **"The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here."** (Matt 12:41) Why did the leaders of the Jews condemn Jesus to be crucified? Was it not because they feared losing their nation and their status in the world?

This is why the LORD sent the storm and then the great fish after Jonah. For it was not only the people of Nineveh who needed to hear the call to repentance. The LORD could have sent someone else, but then Jonah would have died in his sin. So after being saved by water, Jonah found himself on dry land and the Word of the LORD came to him again, and this time Jonah repented and went and preached the message that the LORD wanted the men of Nineveh to hear. **"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"**

Now comes the part that should cause us all to drop immediately to our knees.

And the men of Nineveh believed in God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes.

Can you imagine? Today this would be the same as if someone started walking through the city of New York crying out that everyone should repent, and having every head of every household in that great city to stop everything and to declare publicly that he and his family believed in God and each man and his household were baptized and began to partake of the Holy Communion. For this is the equivalent of what happened in Nineveh.

The text clearly teaches us that the men did like Adam and stopped everything and believed in God. This was the case for the entire city. The men. Not the women, heard the Word and believed God. The men, called their families to repentance and faith. The conversion was so complete that when the king, the mayor of the city heard of it, he also repented and believed and declared it for the entire city.

It was just as Jonah knew that it would be. Even the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost seems like a small event compared to this! Even at Pentecost the entire city did not repent and believe. Even at Pentecost only a tiny remnant of all who were in Jerusalem were converted. But in this three day preaching event, the greatest city in the world repented, including the king. And this mighty miracle certainly was made known throughout the world.

There is only one way to explain this. This is not the way of men. This was the working of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Living Word of God.

III. AND GOD RELENTED

"Thy will be done!" Truly God's will, God's good and gracious will, was done. This is how Jesus teaches us to pray. **"Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done!"**

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

This was God's will all along. This was what He was bringing about by ordaining Jonah as an apostle to the Gentiles. God did not want to destroy Nineveh. God wanted the men of Nineveh to realize, as Adam did in the garden, that they had cut themselves off from the life that God created them to live. He wanted them to acknowledge that their ways were only of the knowledge of evil and that He desired to restore them again to the knowledge of Good.

They repented. Then they knew what good really is again. Then they believed in God again. Then they no longer cared about trying to win at Monopoly. Now they trusted in God and their lives showed it. God saw it and pronounced it as good by not carrying out the threat that He sent Jonah to preach.

I read a quotation attributed to Abraham Lincoln that says: **"I am a success today because I had a friend who believed in me and I didn't have the heart to let him down..."** I don't know whether Lincoln said this or not. But this does show something of what the LORD teaches us in this account of what He did for Nineveh. The LORD believed in Nineveh because of what He knew that He would do for them. He knew from eternity the miracle of faith that would be worked in this great city. The men of the city heard and believed the mercy of the LORD and their lives were changed by it. They began to live again like men rather than like sons of the devil.

This is how it works for us today as well. God comes to us through the preaching of His Word of Law and Gospel and we are brought to believe in Him, to trust that He is pleased with us and believes in us for Jesus' sake. Knowing that He is well-pleased with us changes our hearts so that like Abe Lincoln, we don't have the heart to let Him down. Our hearts have been changed by God so that we now know His love to us, His belief in us. His love is what changes us into new people so that our lives demonstrate His love to the world.

God's will toward us does not change because we repent. We repent when He converts our hearts so that we believe that His will is truly good. Then we believe in the One who is for us and not against us. Then we fall to our knees and confess our sins, knowing that He is well-pleased to raise us up by His holy absolution to live the life that Jesus has purchased and won for us with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.

CONCLUSION

Truly this is what the LORD ordains for us again today, **"Preach to them the message that I tell you."** This is why we gather together. This is what the Holy Spirit imparts to us. This is what we eat and drink at the Lord's Table. Truly the LORD our God is good, and in Him we receive His goodness as our own. What a wonderful Word to hear as we enter into this season of Lent. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.