

The 4th Sunday after Epiphany: January 29, 2017
“God is in the Details”

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

The account of Jonah is a familiar one to many of us, especially this first chapter. And as it goes with many familiar stories, the more we think we know a story, the more details we simply gloss over when we recall it. What do you remember of Jonah? Here’s a quick recap of the first chapter. Jonah is called by God to do something, and Jonah flees in the complete opposite direction. God sends a storm. Jonah still needs some convincing. Finally Jonah confesses, he is thrown overboard where a giant fish swallows him, and three days later, spits him up on dry land. Thus ends our reading for today.

While this is perhaps an ok summary, we see in Jonah, God is in the details. There are many things we learn not only about God, and Jonah, but also ourselves. Beginning with the name “Jonah.” Jonah’s name is the Hebrew noun for dove, and what an accurate description of him. He often acts silly, brainless, flighty, flying from one place to another as frightened and without trust in Yahweh, the God of the heavens and the earth. He is called by God to do something. A task that God wants him to do, and Jonah tries everything he can to get away.

We are much like Jonah. We try to get away from God also. He calls us be faithful, to be good children, to love each other as brothers and sisters. He calls us to fear, love, and trust in Him above everything else, and to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. We are called to be faithful in these two basic commands as we live out our lives. At work, at school, at home, in the store, in the car, in the field, in the hospital, wherever life finds us from one moment to the next, God calls us to do His will, trust in Him, do what He desires. Hold tightly to His Word and let that love shine forth to others as His Gospel is proclaimed to others by our words and deeds.

Yet, what do we do? We like Jonah, try to run away. We fly away. We make futile attempts to flee. We gather others in our sins, and sometimes deceptively so. We circle ourselves with people who will attempt to help us in our hiding. We seek

others who will tell us not what God's Word declares, but what I want to hear about myself. I don't want to hear what God wants. I want to do what I want. His way is too hard!

So we attempt to flitter away in rebellion to God, but He will not have it. So He sends a storm to Jonah. These sailors Jonah hires are not dumb. They are experienced mariners, and if there was a chance of inclement weather, they would not have left. A storm overtakes the little circle of makeshift friends. It is swift and it is intense. So much so, that these experienced seadogs were afraid. God does not send this storm to destroy anyone aboard, but rather to save them. Take careful note of the details.

First, these men call upon their own gods. They seek other ways of self-comfort. They cry to anyone whom they think can help. They do not turn to God, they turn to other things which they love or trust. Then when those things do not help, these men hurl cargo out of the ship into the sea so the ship is lighter. With a lighter load, they believe they can row more quickly to the shore.

Oh, how we are just like these men. When we turn to our false gods, to our own idols, and they no longer help. We search for ways that we can lighten the load and do the work ourselves more rapidly. We turn to Facebook blasts, Twitter explosions, gossip fires, hatred and complete indignation. We throw everything and everyone off our ship, to make our loads lighter to row to shore. The only one that matters is me!

Then see what Jonah does. He is still caught in denial and while the storm rages, he still does not see his sin. He does not grasp his responsibility, nor the power of God. He goes down into the ship to sleep. Now this is not the sleep of confidence as displayed by Jesus. This is the sleep of denial. Jonah, in his sin, is on the run. It is not unusual for people in profound states of denial to seek out extreme ways of dealing with their situations. Sleep, food, alcohol, sex and drugs seem to offer escape and release from the implications of reality. Jonah is seeking to escape from the vocation in which God has placed him. Jonah's sleep is more of paralysis than of faith.

When all else fails, the captain wakes Jonah and demands that Jonah calls on his God. An unbeliever, calls the believer to repentance! And how does Jonah react?

He still remains in denial. They have to cast lots and pray that God will give them an answer. Jonah's desire to remain unknown and escape responsibility was greater than his willingness to alleviate the suffering of others. His desire to remain hidden and flying away in his sins was even greater than his willingness to prevent the death of others. Oh how the self becomes an idol!

But we really shouldn't be so hard on Jonah, should we? We do the same. Our desire to escape responsibility and our desire to remain unknown, drives us to stay hidden at all costs. Rather than confess our sins, we hide them. We fight for them. Worse yet, we feebly try to justify them or declare that God is wrong.

When the lot finally falls on Jonah, he has nowhere else to turn, and so he confesses his sins, his feeble and futile attempts to run, and the power, the grace and reality of the One True God. Jonah tells them to hurl him in the sea and the waters will calm. Here is another great part of human sinfulness and hostility towards God, they still continue to try and do it themselves! At great length, the men finally come to the realization that they should do what God commands. They trust in His words and not their own. So they hurl Jonah in the sea. The waters calm and hear again verse 16, "Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows."

God did not want Jonah to die. He wanted him to preach. Through these acts, Jonah was saved, these mariners were saved, and Nineveh would be saved. God sends the storm not to destroy. He sends it so save! To show His grace is sufficient. That His power is made perfect in weakness.

In Jonah, we identify with the saint and sinner at the same time. We see his faith. We see his rejection of God. We see his disobedience, his half-truths, his arrogance, his pride, and his anger. He is a sinner and a saint whose chief problem is application of the Gospel.

Little Jonah may be more important for us than we typically give him credit. Jesus in Matthew 12 tells the scribes and the Pharisees the only sign they will be given concerning the Son of Man will be the sign of Jonah. "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at

the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.”¹

Jesus is the great sacrifice that brings an end to God’s wrath. He bears the judgment for sin on your behalf. When Jesus speaks of Jonah, He is not merely talking about the deliverance from the great fish. Jesus speaks of the paradox that He would soon be under God’s judgment and God’s salvation. Jesus parallels Jonah in two ways. First, Jonah’s descent into Sheol and Jesus’ experience of death. Three days, Jonah felt as though he was dead. Jesus actually experienced death. Jesus actually died and was buried.

Second, Jonah felt as though he was driven away from God. Jonah 2:4-5 reads, “I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple. The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me.”² Jesus, on the other hand, was truly forsaken by the Father. Hanging on the cross He cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”³ God turned His face towards Jonah and saved Him from death by a miracle. God turned His back on Jesus, and saved you from death, by the death of His only-begotten Son. Jonah and Jesus had to go through judgment, condemnation, and death before the experienced new life.

Jesus, the One who was hung on the cross for our offenses against God, died and was buried in a tomb, 3 days later burst forth from the tomb, vindicated by God and proclaiming victory. He is the only One who can take the tumult of our sea of life and calm the waters.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, hear the words of Romans 6, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”⁴

¹ Matthew 12:40–41

² Jonah 2:4–5

³ Matthew 27:46

⁴ Romans 6:1–4

He has washed you in water and word. He has given you peace with Your Father in heaven. Through this sacrifice, God is not a wrathful deity; He is your merciful Father. Here in this very place, He anchors you with His very word. His very peace is given to you. The fruits of His cross are given to you through the very fruit of the vine; as through His Word, it is not mere bread and wine; it is the very body and blood of Jesus Christ Himself, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Rather than running to our own devices in futile attempts to escape, God bestows us with His very means that truly frees us from God's wrath against sin. We are given new life, and fed with God Himself for forgiveness, receiving life and salvation. Here we see in beautiful, stunning detail, Jesus' own body and blood received by faith for forgiveness. Here we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. While we try to run and hide. Jesus was nailed in place for all to see, and here He breaks forth into our time with His gifts of grace and life-bestowing.

These most precious gifts allow us to work in confidence and love out there. In this new life we pray, "O Trinity of love and pow'r, Our people shield in danger's hour; From rock and tempest, fire and foe, Protect them wheresoe'er they go; Thus evermore shall rise to Thee Glad praise from air and land and sea."⁵ Amen.

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

⁵ 717 Eternal Father, Strong to Save: *stanza, 4*