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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/10/2010, Midweek Lent 3
Jonah in the Belly of the Whale (Jonah 1 and 2)
Also, Matthew 12:38-41
Three Days

PRAYER OF THE DAY

P Eternal Lord, your kingdom has broken into our troubled world through the life, death, and resurrection of your Son. Help us to hear your Word and obey it, so that we become instruments of your redeeming love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

FIRST LESSON..... Jonah 1 and 2, KJV
[The Revised Common Lectionary, which we use here at Immanuel, does include readings from Jonah, once during Epiphany and once during the Season after Pentecost. But those readings are from the last two chapters of Jonah. They are about the preaching of Jonah in Nineveh. This evening's reading is the first part of the story, including Jonah and the whale.]

¹Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ²Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me. ³But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. ⁴But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken. ⁵Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep. ⁶So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not. ⁷And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. ⁸Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou? ⁹And he said unto them, I am an Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land. ¹⁰Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. ¹¹Then said they unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous. ¹²And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know

that for my sake this great tempest is upon you. ¹³Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them. ¹⁴Wherefore they cried unto the LORD, and said, We beseech thee, O LORD, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for thou, O LORD, hast done as it pleased thee. ¹⁵So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD, and made vows. ¹⁷Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

^{2:1}Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly, ²And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice. ³For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me. ⁴Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple. ⁵The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. ⁶I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God. ⁷When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple. ⁸They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy. ⁹But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD. ¹⁰And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 12:38-41, RSV

³⁸Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." ³⁹But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹The men of Nineveh will arise 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.

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

Let me repeat that last saying from our Gospel Reading. It is my theme this evening:

...and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. (Matthew 12:41, RSV)

It is the way of these Midweek Lent Sermons that we consider an Old Testament patriarch or saint, and then we look at Jesus Christ again, perhaps seeing something new in him by way of comparison or contrast with the saint of old. Last week, for example, we considered that virtuous man, Joseph, oppressed and tempted there in Egypt. And then, we turned to that Greater Joseph, Jesus, who was more virtuous still than even Joseph, and whose life represented salvation not only for Israel in the days of famine, but for our whole world and every willing soul on the face of this earth.

This evening, we consider Jonah and try to reckon with the saying in our Gospel Lesson that “something greater than Jonah is here.” Indeed, that is true! For what we learn of Jesus by way of reflecting on Jonah is chiefly by way of contrast, not similarity. Jonah was a rascal, in my opinion, who occasionally rose to some height of spiritual excellence, but soon rebounded to his more natural state of stubbornness at odds with the mercy of God. Still, there are interesting points of similarity and contrast with our good Lord Jesus. Let me speak of them under three headings: First, *sin brings misery*. It makes life miserable both for the sinner and for those around the sinner. Second, I’d like us to consider *the prayer of the penitent*. When Jonah was at last driven to his knees in prayer, the Lord showed mercy on the sinner. And third, I’d like us to take encouragement in *the Lord’s rescue of the penitent*. Jonah was in terrible straits. It is hard to imagine a more creepy tomb than the tummy of whale. Yet the Lord raised up the man burdened with sin.

So, let’s begin with the first point: sin brings misery. I begin with the mercantile point that Jonah’s sin cost the mariners their merchandise, and this is no small matter.

Jonah had fled from the Lord. The Lord had commanded him to go to Nineveh, in modern-day Iraq. Instead, the man headed out in the opposite direction. He made his way to the seacoast town of Joppa, got himself taken on board a sailing ship, and headed off west, away from Nineveh. I don’t know what the man was thinking. By this point in the story of Israel, Jonah should have known that there was nowhere he could go that would be beyond the reach of the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth. In the Temple, surely Jonah had heard the choirs chant the Psalm of old:

⁷Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

⁸If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.

⁹If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

¹⁰Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

¹¹If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me.

¹²Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee. (Psalm 139:7-12, KJV)

Still, Jonah did this thing: he fled from the Lord. But he fled in vain, for the Lord hurled a tempest onto the sea. Mariners are brave people, and if they have survived on the variable and violent sea, then they are seasoned too and confident that they can handle many a storm. But not *this* storm! This storm had a divine intention behind it, laying claim to Jonah. The mariners do what they can. The row till their backs are breaking, but to no avail. So, the text says, they throw their wares overboard, to lighten the ship. That means that they have thrown their profit overboard. Better that, of course, than to lose the ship and their own lives. Still, you will never catch me taking this loss lightly. How many backs had become worn out loading that merchandise onto the ship? How many storms and tricky currents and dangerous rocks had already been avoided trying to protect these wares? How important the payday was to the mariners and to their families back home and to the owners of the ship. The loss of this merchandise might have bankrupted them. No, the loss of the merchandise is no trivial part of the story. Those wares represented blood and sweat and toil, hopes and dreams. That is why here at Immanuel we are determined to count as precious the tithes and offerings that people give to our church. Money is a significant part of the lives of people, both modern people and the ancient mariners unfortunate enough to have set sail with Jonah in their midst.

So, sin brings misery for Jonah's neighbors, costing them their merchandise and risking their lives. But also sin brought misery to Jonah. If he had never been caught and summoned back by the Lord, it would still have cost him misery. If the Lord had simply let him fly away from his prophetic duty, let him take sail, and never stirred up the sea against him, still Jonah had made his life much poorer by disobeying the Lord. The rebuke he received by the shipmaster is a symbol of who cock-eyed and out of rhyme with reality Jonah had made his life:

⁶So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not. (Jonah 1:6, KJV)

Here is Jonah, a prophet of the Lord, being scolded into prayer by a pagan shipmaster. Why, that was Jonah's job! He was the one who was supposed to rouse people from sleep. He was the one who was supposed to urge people to pray. He was the one who was supposed to help people get back on track. But now his dignity is given to another, who has to arouse him from sleep and urge him to

prayer. If the Lord had not intervened, never again would Jonah have been a prophet. Never again would he have been entrusted with the very Word of the Lord and urged to speak it. What was he going to be now? A farmer somewhere? Well, that would have been noble work except that it was not his work. He was called to be a prophet, but he was fleeing his calling.

Let us not follow Jonah in this. If we are baptized, we are called to be Christ's man, Christ's woman, Christ's boy, Christ's girl. Let us never flee that divine position. Fleeing can only launch us into disharmony with our Maker's intention for us. Backsliding can only put us into spiritual misery.

So, if Jonah had never been sought after and fetched back by the Lord, his life would have been poorer anyway for his sin. But in fact, the Lord did go after Jonah, and then what misery the man knew! First, there was the misery of the guilty conscience, in which Jonah knew that *he* was the cause of the danger to the mariners. He was the cause of the loss of the merchandize. He was the cause of these troubles on the sea.

And then he was tossed into the sea. The mariners did the best they could to avoid that awful step, but Jonah himself insisted upon its necessity and so it was.

This brings me to the second part of this sermon -- the "prayer of the penitent." In this evening's Bible story, Jonah prayed two kinds of prayers. Both of them were excellent. His first was a prayer of intercession, addressed not to God, but to the mariners. His other prayer was a prayer of petition -- desperate petition from the belly of the whale.

Jonah was never finer, in my opinion, when he urged the mariners to toss him overboard into the sea:

¹¹Then said they unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous. ¹²And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you. (Jonah 1, KJV)

By all human standards and reason, Jonah was surrendering his life now in order to save the life of the mariners. He offered his life that others might live. This is a Christ-like moment for Jonah. The man has made himself akin to the one spoken of by Isaiah of old:

⁴Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. ⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. ⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6, KJV)

Jesus is indeed one “greater than Jonah” in his intercession, for Jesus suffered innocently that we, the guilty, might have hope in this world. Jonah, on the other hand, suffered because of his own sin. Still, Jonah did well in encouraging the mariners to toss him into the sea that they might live. And it worked. A great calm came upon the sea when the mariners did this awful deed.

Jonah’s second kind of prayer was a prayer of petition. The Lord had prepared a certain whale, guided that big fellow to this particular ship, and had the whale swallow Jonah when he was hurled into the sea. The whale saved the man. But it could not have been a pleasant experience for Jonah to rest there in the damp and the darkness of the whale’s stomach. The odds were stacked against him. How long did he imagine he could live in that strange dwelling? Who could blame him if he had fallen into despair? He had disobeyed God and fled from him. Did he dare now to suppose that he could pray to the very God he had forsaken?

Well, pray he did, whether or not he had the right to pray. And it seems to me that his prayer can well serve as a kind of model for every troubled soul. He acknowledges his deep troubles, but he expresses confidence that God will save the sinner:

⁵The waters closed in over me, the deep was round about me; weeds were wrapped about my head ⁶at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me for ever; yet thou didst bring up my life from the Pit, O LORD my God. ⁷When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to thee...
(Jonah 2:5-7, RSV)

If ever you should be feeling low, God save you that you should be *this* low, lying in the belly of a whale, down there are roots of the mountains in the bottom of the sea, with seaweeds wrapped around your head, and conscious of how much you had rebelled and offended against your Maker. Yet even if your straits were so bad as that, go ahead and pray. For with the Lord, there is mercy.

The corresponding prayer of Jesus was much simpler. When his lungs and internal organs were collapsing and death was drawing near, he prayed a simple prayer akin to that of Jonah. He simply trusted himself over to his heavenly Father:

And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.
(Luke 23:46, KJV)

Sin caused the misery, for both Jonah and Jesus. Their cases were very different, for the offending sin in the case of Jonah was his own sin, while in the case of Jesus it was your sin and my sin. Still, the Gospel is that God is willing to rescue the penitent.

At the graveside, I have sometimes referred to the story of the mariner's casting Jonah into the sea. It is a hopeless situation, to all appearances, just as placing the coffin into the ground seems to be the end of hope.

But listen to St. John Chrysostom's rejoicing over the Lord's mastery of Jonah's seemingly hopeless situation:

Of a truth, the waves received, but they did not suffocate him. The whale received him, but did not destroy him; both the animal and the element gave back to God unhurt that with which they were entrusted... the sea and the monster guarding him with great kindness; all these things being under God's direction." (Chrysostom)

And so it is with that Greater Jonah, I mean Jesus Christ our Lord. He was killed and laid in a grave. Like Jonah, he lay in that seemingly hopeless situation for three days. Yet when Easter morning came, we find that the tomb had guarded Jesus with great kindness. He was "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." (John 1:29, KJV) And in three day's time, he was raised up, so that he could become our Great Intercessor and that the preaching of his name should go forward, even to Nineveh, even to New York City, even to the ends of the world.

I give credit to Jonah for this: that he sought to spare the life of the mariners by the surrender of his own life. I give even more credit to Jesus, who sought to spare the life of the whole world by the surrender of his innocent life, and who lives again, to continue his ministry of intercession for us, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.