



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 21, 2018

“The God of Another Chance”

(Jonah 3:1-4)

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“Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against 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, three days’ journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’” (Jonah 3:1-4).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. **Amen**

All over the Bible, at God's command, people are getting up and going. When God calls them to service, they get up and go. Abraham, Moses, James and John, they all follow at God's command. Even Lazarus, dead as door nail, gets up and comes out at the Lord's command. So when the Word of the Lord came to Jonah- "Arise, go to Nineveh", we expect to read next, "So he rose up and went to Nineveh." That's the usual formula. Not so with Jonah. "Arise, go to Nineveh . . . So Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish" (which happens to be in the opposite direction). Jonah was running away from responsibility, away from the vocation God had for him.

You know what happens. Jonah buys a one-way ticket on a boat. The Lord stirs up the waters. The pagan crew figures out it is Jonah's disobedience that's causing the storm and they toss him overboard. Sure enough, the sea becomes quiet and still.

Jonah sinks, maybe because he can't swim . . . maybe because he doesn't want to. In either case he is saved by some kind of sea creature, a custom ordered fish or whale. This sea creature, we'll call it a whale, follows the Lord's calling for his life when God's man Jonah does not.

Of course, this is where it all gets a little dicey for us. It's hard for us to imagine anything swallowing a man whole and the man living to tell about it. It's even harder for us to swallow and accept this story as factual. Many choose to think of this as just a whale of a good tale. For me, it stretches the edges of my faith for sure, but I remind myself God can do anything he wants to do. And this is only one of many little miracles in Jonah. In Jonah 1:17, "The Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah." In chapter 4, verse 6, "Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow

up over Jonah to give shade for his head and to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint and wanted to die." So, all in the space of a few chapters, the Lord provided a 1) great fish to save Jonah, 2) a vine to give Jonah shade, 3) a small worm to chew on the vine, and finally, 4) a scorching east wind to really rile him up. Tell me, which of these miracles was the most difficult for the Lord; or is it more accurate to say nothing is too difficult for the Lord? Creating a really big beast for his purposes is no more difficult for God than appointing a really small worm for his purposes. In any event, don't get so hung up on the miracle of the whale that you miss out on the message of Jonah!

Now Jonah's disposition was sour enough to curdle milk, and the great sea creature starts to suffer from a severe attack of acid indigestion. The great sea creature takes a repentant Jonah back to where he started and with a great big heave-ho, barfs him up onto the beach, rather unceremoniously. Can you see Jonah standing there, all soggy with the digestive juices of that sea creature, with sand and seaweed in his hair? He's still angry, but at least now he's a little more cooperative. Chapter 3:1, "Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh.'" Lo and behold, this time the formula runs its course. "So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh."

God has managed to change the direction of Jonah's journey, but he hasn't managed yet to change his heart. Jonah wants no part in bringing the word of the Lord to the Ninevites. His feet are taking him to Nineveh, but his heart is still steaming toward Tarshish. It's not that he's afraid of the Ninevites. He hates them. They were historic enemies of Israel, a brutal people. He's afraid of God. He's afraid God will choose to have mercy on the Ninevites. Jonah wants God to blow that city sky high, like he did Sodom and Gomorrah.

You recall Abraham interceded repeatedly for the innocent of Sodom and Gomorrah, but for Jonah the only good Ninevite is a dead Ninevite. Whether there were ten or a ten thousand righteous ones in Nineveh makes no difference to Jonah because he's already made up his mind about the whole lot of them.

Never was there a more disagreeable prophet. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for God to just let Jonah sink. But that's not the kind of God we have. He doesn't give up on Jonah. He follows him to the depths of the sea and gives him another chance.

It would have been the easiest thing in the world for God to let the crew of that ship go down. They were pagans. They did not acknowledge God nor pray to him. They prayed to other gods. But God has a heart for the lost. He has compassion even on those who don't acknowledge him. He doesn't give up on the crew, but gives them another chance.

It would have been the easiest thing in the world for God to wipe out the Ninevites. Their wickedness and immorality was renown. It would have been easy for God to give them a taste of their own medicine. But God doesn't rejoice in the suffering of the wicked . . . He has compassion even on them. Through the preaching of Jonah, he will give them another chance. Our God is the God of another chance.

This is a very different image of God from the popular and prevailing picture of God as judge. This is a God who cares so deeply that he doesn't easily give up on us, no matter what we've done, no matter how lost our cause.

Do you remember the story of Seabiscuit? Seabiscuit was a race horse during the 1930's. He didn't have much of a pedigree. He was knobby-kneed and undersized, given to sleeping and eating way too much. Trainers thought of him as lazy, and indeed, he was not doing well on the race track. But then a trainer by the name of Tom Smith saw something in Seabiscuit, some hidden potential that no one else could see. He understood Seabiscuit like no one else did. With his expertise, sure enough, the undersized underdog with

knobby knees and a great big heart started to win races. It was during the Great Depression, when the whole country felt like it was an underdog. Seabiscuit grabbed the nation's admiration.

Then he suffered an injury to his leg and the vet was thinking about putting him down. Smith intervened, "You don't throw away a whole life just because it's banged up a bit." He gives Seabiscuit another chance, and after a very long time brings him back into racing form, a small miracle really.

That's how God deals with Jonah. He gives him another chance. That's how he deals with the crew of that ship. That's how God deals with the people of Nineveh. That's how he deals with you and me. God doesn't throw away a life just because it's banged up a bit. And we're all banged up by sin. Sin and its wages has a grip on us all. Our sin, like that of Jonah's and the Ninevites, is renown . . . at least to God. It rises before him like a foul and putrid stench. It would be the easiest thing in the world for God to wipe us all out. It would also be just and fair. But God doesn't throw away lives so easily. He doesn't give up so easily. He gets no pleasure in the death of the wicked. And he sees potential no one else can see. He sees potential for repentance and forgiveness. He sees potential for faith and obedience. He sees potential for us in our vocations, making a positive difference in the lives of those around us. And by his grace and generosity and goodness he gives us another chance. He is the God of another chance.

Maybe like me you have used up your second chance . . . and your third, and your 23rd, and your 243rd chance. What now? First this: "Thou shalt not test the Lord thy God." That's the Law. There does come a time when the Lord hands us over to our sin. There comes a time when, instead of trying to draw us back, he just lets us have it our own way, which is the most devastating of all punishments.

The Good News is our God is patient with us, not wanting anyone to perish but all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). The Good News is God is "compassionate and

gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Ps. 103:8). The Good News is our God permits new beginnings and makes them possible with his forgiveness.

Remember when Peter asked how many times he should forgive his brother, up to seven times. And Jesus says, “I tell you not seven times but 70 times 7.” It’s not about the math. It’s about ongoing forgiveness, a reflection of God’s own ongoing forgiveness. That is, we live in a state of grace, and are forgiven of far more than we will ever be able to conjure up and confess. Our very lives have been covered over with the blood of Christ. That state of grace was given you in your baptism where sin is washed away and where the sinner becomes a saint.

Jonah survived because of the grace and patience and compassion and generosity of God. The pagan crew survived because of the grace of God. The people of Nineveh survived because of the grace of God. You and I live, and will live, by the grace of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

