**Waiting For The Lord: To Grant Repentance**

**Jonah 3:1-10**

Ash Wednesday

03.02.2022

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Every year we celebrate the season of Lent, during these weeks of Lent, we are in Vigil – we are waiting for our Lord to fulfill His promises for us. Those promises are recorded in Holy Scriptures for us to hear, to know, and even to proclaim.

Ash Wednesday we gather in a most solemn way. The imposition of ash reminds us of our sinfulness and our need for a Savior. This is why we are always vigilant, awake, waiting for Christ our Lord: To Grant Repentance.

Jonah was an unwilling prophet. The Lord had commanded him to go to Nineveh and proclaim the Word of the Lord. His wrath was about to be unleashed against the Ninevites. In forty days Nineveh shall be overthrown.

Often when Jonah is read and used as sermon fodder, the focus is Jonah’s refusal to do what God commanded. We consider how he chooses to board a boat headed away from Nineveh, only the Lord brings on a storm during which Jonah ends up being thrown overboard. In the sea, God causes a great fish to swallow him. He remains in the fish three days and is thrown up alive on dry land.

This is, of course, is the sign of Jonah that Jesus speaks of – pointing forward to the Lord’s three-day rest in the tomb following His crucifixion.

Today’s focus is different because we are not focusing on Jonah’s actions. Instead, we are focusing on the Ninevite’s response to the Lord, the repentance which he grants them.

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. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

At the word of the Lord proclaimed by Jonah, the Ninevites are warned, their sin against God is called out. His wrath will come against them and overthrow Nineveh.

No one likes to have their sins pointed out to them. Just as Jonah was reluctant to speak God’s word to Nineveh, we are often reluctant to hear the condemnation of our own sins.

It is especially true that many live as if there is no such thing as sin. Many live as their own god, an idol that we need to honestly name – ‘the god of you’. Whatever you might like to do, whatever makes you feel good, whatever makes you happy, do it. And ‘the god of you’ will bless what you do.

In our world today – if you are confused about your gender—that’s okay, because the ‘god of you’ must have made a mistake.

Living together outside of the holy bonds of marriage? ‘The god of you’ wants you to be happy.

These are obvious failings of people, obvious sins that the ‘god of you’ condones. There are other sins that are not so obvious, ones we may not even know or realize we are committing. Although we are “good Christians” the ‘god of you’ often tries to justify them in our own minds.

Over consumption of food and drink, gluttony. Speaking poorly of your neighbor. Hating those whom you do not even know.

Failing to live your life in the light of Christ, sneaking off into the dark to do the things that ought not be done.

Failing to live your life in the light of Christ by failing to do the things you know should BE done.

These things are not sinful in the sight of the ‘god of you’, for that god does not condemn you. In fact, that god – that idol – will justify all your works.

Where there is no condemnation, there is no need for repentance.

But what happens when the ‘god of you’ is unsatisfied, displeased, or angered? What happens when this idol does not stop the guilt which comes from the true Law written in your heart – God’s Law written there from your conception? Now there is nowhere for you to turn. The ‘god of you’ is deaf, in fact, it has no answer.

When you set the rules and expectations for you, and then you fail to rise to them, who can forgive? Who can assure? Who can grant you comfort in the sorrow of your failures?

No one.

There is no one to whom you can turn in seeking forgiveness when you are the law giver, because the ‘god of you’ is only yourself. When you fail you, there is only despair and regret, without escape. Belief in the ‘god of you’, is belief in an idol who can do nothing for you.

Ultimately, this idolatry is simply unbelief in the true God of all things.

Unbelief leads us away from God, away from salvation, away from joy, away from peace, away from assurance, away from comfort. Unbelief steals from us the opportunity to repent of our sins.

We poor sinners needing to repent so that we can be forgiven, often forget this truth. We forget that forgiveness comes from outside of ourselves. There is a God outside us, greater than ourselves, who grants us repentance – for the forgiveness of sins.

God’s grace, by the Spirit’s working in the Word of God proclaimed by Jonah work on those who hear it. The people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

The Ninevites also had an idol. They worshipped Dagon, a fish headed ‘god of you’. God sent his servant, Jonah, to warn them from their sin, and call them to repent – to turn from their idol and return to worship of the True God.

Like the Ninevites, the Lord sends His servants – pastors, elders, parents – to remind us of our True God. The God whose Law calls out our sin. The God who – by His word grants us faith to repent for the forgiveness of sins.

Dwelling in you is God’s Holy Spirit. He calls and guides us back to the place where God speaks. Calls us back into His house – even here, this very evening.

The Lord’s called and ordained pastor speaks, and you are reminded of the sinful nature that still hangs about your neck – the things for which you are guilty.

The guilt from which we seek assurance and comfort, that is, forgiveness.

Faith begun in you in your baptism into Christ Jesus, grants you faith by which you repent.

If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)

You now repent because the Lord has granted you repentance through faith in Him. You believe – even though you are a sinful creature – that you have been forgiven of all sinfulness by the blood of Christ Jesus shed upon the cross – for you.

The repentance the Lord grants you, opens your eyes to the idol of the ‘god of you’. Repentance turns you away from your idol, toward the Lord, the Triune God in assurance and comfort in your sorrow. In repentance, granted to you by God, you are now forgiven and cleansed.

The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.

Sackcloth and ashes are a mark of repentance. Sackcloth – material like old burlap seed bags – certainly not someone we want to wear like cloths touching our skin. These are an outward sign to the Lord and to our neighbor of a contrite heart seeking His forgiveness.

Even the king, ruler of all of Nineveh, sat in ashes. He sat in repentance for the sin of himself and his nation, for who knows – God may turn and relent, so that we may not perish.

The Lord has relented. The Lord has even taken an active role, offering up His only begotten Son as the sacrifice, the atoning sacrifice – the full payment in blood and death – for your sin and mine. He grants forgiveness to all whom He also has granted repentance by faith.

This evening some of you will receive ashes upon your forehead in the shape of the cross. Ashes mark your repentance, granted by faith in the Lord your God.

You recognize your sin, and so you confess it –the Lord listens to you, the Lord hears you. By the blood of His Christ, the Lord God almighty removes that sin from you, and you shall not perish, but you live in Him – now and forever.

We still maintain the vigil. We remain awake, for the Lord will come again. Yes, He will be a scourge to those who are unbelieving – a terror to those who trust only in the idol gods they have made for themselves.

But He is a blessing to those who believe in the sign of Jonah – those who trust that the Son of Man who died and was in the earth three days – was raised from the dead for your salvation.

God grant you this repentant faith for Jesus sake. Amen