

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you. 3So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. 4Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" 5And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ¶10When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

DIAGNOSIS: Tombs

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Stubbornly Headed in the Wrong Direction*

Today we hear the Word of God as it comes to Jonah a *second* time...a second time!...because, as you might recall from Sunday School, the first time wasn't that successful. "Go east," God said to Jonah. "Go to Nineveh." So Jonah turned around 180° and went west as fast and as far as he could. He booked a ship to run away from God, only to discover that there is no place where one can ever hide from God. God threw up a mighty storm to stop Jonah in his tracks. And the dilemma this created for the Ninevites was that, without Jonah going to Nineveh as God commanded, there was no prophet to proclaim the bad news that might lead them to the good news of God's amazing

grace and let God turn from God's fierce anger.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Appalled by Grace*

Jonah did not find God's grace amazing. He found it quite appalling. Appalling that it should include the Assyrians who were his bitter enemies. Assyrian bas-reliefs verify the fact that Assyrian soldiers did indeed lead captives out of Israel strung together with large fishhooks in their mouths. Not only were the Assyrians harshly brutal, but they gloated in it. No wonder Jonah is so angry in chapter 4 after God speaks to him a second time. "I knew it, Lord...I knew it...I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."

And just how far do we have to go to find the Jonah-types today? People who are so consumed with hate that they would rather die than see their enemies forgiven? We love it when God is gracious to those we love or to those innocents who need it. We are not so happy when God is gracious to those whom we bitterly oppose. We would just as soon have God bless "us" and forget "them." We would rather die in the separation of our sin than see someone who is nasty to us be included in God's fellowship, welcomed and forgiven. Jonah would rather die than go to Nineveh. "*It is better for me to die than to live,*" he says in his defiance to his divine call to "go at once to Nineveh ...and cry out against it."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *A Watery Tomb*

And so Jonah had his shipmates throw him into the sea. He sought a watery tomb for himself and a destructive end to the Ninevites, since they would have no one to proclaim to them God's Word of law, God's threat and warning. That's what any other territorial god would do. Seek revenge and slay the foreign offenders.

PROGNOSIS: Wombs

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *A Watery Womb*

But God would not permit Jonah to die. God sent a fish to swallow him and put him in a watery womb where he could be born again. Three days, three night Jonah spent in the belly of a fish until the fish spat him ashore to begin again. Little did Jonah know it, but God was recycling him and foreshadowing the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ we have a God who stops us in our tracks and intervenes. A God who would rather die himself and spend three days in the tomb than see a sinner perish. On the cross God takes the arms of Jesus and stretches and extends them until they are big enough to bear the anger and the hate of the entire world.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Amazed by Grace*

Jonah still didn't find the grace of God amazing. And he went off to Nineveh reluctantly...defiantly...like a disgruntled teenager...pouting all the way. *"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* Jonah said to them in the shortest sermon recorded in the Bible... five words in Hebrew...only five words...he was that half-hearted! But wouldn't you know it? The Ninevites repented. And God forgave them. Isn't this amazing? Jonah speaks no word of gospel, he lifts up no word of promise, he mumbles beneath his breath, and yet the Ninevites turned from their evil ways and repented. And God...? *"God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it."* That truly is amazing grace—grace that we come to understand can save the likes Jonah, a Ninevite, or even someone like you or me!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Spiritedly Headed in the Right Direction*

We can be like Jonah, the man who thought small: only of himself and his own people. We can follow Jonah down into the sea of

desperate flight from our commission and into a dark, cold, lifeless separation and isolation from our fellow human beings. We can fight the promptings of God's Spirit. And yet, God can still use us with all of our prejudices intact. God can make something fantastic come out of our half-hearted attempts at Christian ministry and mission. The Word of God that calls us to our duty can still make good things happen even when we go kicking and screaming all the way.

But isn't it much better when we die to sin and rise with Christ in Holy Baptism? When God first puts us into a watery womb and soaks us with his own gracious Spirit before he splashes us ashore, renewed, recycled, and reclaimed. Jesus has given us a job to do. And Jesus has given us his Word to do it and his own Spirit to lead us. And by God's steadfast love God can take dead, self-centered Christians and make them lively Christ-like ministers of outreach and concern. And this shouldn't be that surprising to anyone who knows this God. For this God is exactly what Jonah said God is, even on the worst day in Jonah's life: "You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."