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Trinity Lutheran Church
Decatur, Illinois
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“Jonah, And The Whale Of A Story!”

God’s PEACE is ALWAYS YOURS in Jesus.

The text for our message today is from the book of Jonah:

“The Word of the Lord came to Jonah..... ‘Go to the great city of Ninevah, and preach against it, because its’ wickedness has come up to Me.’ But Jonah ran away from the Lord.....So the Lord provided a whale to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the belly of the whale for 3 days and 3 nights.

From inside the whale, Jonah prayed to the Lord, his God. He said, “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.....When my life was ebbing away, I remembered You, O Lord, and my prayer rose to You, to Your Holy temple.....Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that (IS) theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving will sacrifice to You. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord. At this the Lord commanded the whale, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: “Go to the great city of Ninevah, and proclaim to it the message I give you!” Jonah obeyed the Word of the Lord and went to Ninevah...Jonah proclaimed ‘Forty more days, and Ninevah will be overturned.’ At this, the Ninevites believed in God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackclothwhen God saw what they did, and how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion on them, and did not bring on them the devastation He had promised.

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST,

The first time the Lord asked Jonah to go and preach to the Ninevites, he did what? He did what we often do when God sends us to people or places we don't want to go, He high-tailed-it out of town in the opposite direction. Jonah thought that the Mediterranean would be a nice place to visit, and he booked a quick cruise to Spain. Anything was better than telling others that God loves them, Jonah thought.

Now Ninevah was a great city. It was the Chicago or Los Angeles of the ancient world. It was founded by Nimrod, a bloody fighter, who had a legendary reputation as a hunter and a warrior. And Ninevah lived up to Nimrod's reputation. Ninevah was a violent city, plotting evil and mayhem against its' neighbors, and each other. For Jonah, this was enemy territory. For those of us who aren't comfortable going door-to-door on East Johns inviting people to worship; how would you feel if God sent to go door-to-door on the South side of Chicago, or in South Central L.A.?

And so Jonah headed in the opposite direction to Tarshish (aka Spain). And maybe some of us are running away from that person or family member that God is sending us to as well. So leave it up to the Lord to brew up a storm on the Mediterranean Sea, just as Jonah's cruise ship was pulling out of port. It wasn't long before the ship was about to sink, so all of the sailors on board prayed to their respective pagan gods. But, receiving no answer, they decided to throw their cargo over board to lighten the load. Now, all the while this is going on, Jonah is below deck, sleeping, and dreaming of sipping Pina Colodas, at a beach front hotel, on the Mediterranean coast. Just then the captain shook Jonah awake and said, "***How can you sleep at a time like this? We're sinking, and all of the men are praying to their gods. Call on your God. Maybe he can help us.***" Now sailors in those days were religiously superstitious. Bad weather meant "*someone's to blame*". So they cast lots to see who was responsible for the storm, and, as Holy Luck would have it, the lot fell on Jonah. Who says 'God doesn't have a sense of humor.'? So they asked Jonah who he was, and he answered, "***I am a Hebrew, who worships Yahweh, the God of heaven, Who made the sea and everything in it.***" This terrified the sailors, because Yahweh's powerful reputation was known even by those who didn't believe in Him as the One True God. So they asked Jonah, "***What have you done, to get Yahweh so ticked off at you?***" Page 2

Just Jonah's luck. He ended up on Captain Hook's ship, so to speak. And now it was his turn to "*walk the plank*". When they couldn't row anymore, they all prayed to Yahweh for forgiveness, and tossed Jonah overboard into the drink. Now: just a quick point: We sometimes wonder why God permits sufferings to touch our lives. Yet, God permitted this storm that scared the living stew out of these hardened sailors; and he also permitted Jonah to be tossed overboard, to lead both Jonah and the sailors to repent of their sins, and turn to Yahweh for mercy; who then did show them mercy, so they would trust in Him as their true and saving Lord. Remember, the Lord always has a loving purpose, even when He allows storms to touch our lives as well.

And wouldn't you know it. As soon as they tossed Jonah overboard, the sea became completely calm. Now this is big. Jonah became a sign to those sailors of Jesus, who calmed a storm with just His word. And Jonah also became a sign of Christ, Who, for our salvation was swallowed up in the sea of God's judgment, and spent 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of the earth, before He checked back out of the earth's belly alive!

So Jonah is now swallowed alive, and finds himself in the belly of a whale. The Good News is: you can do a lot of thinking about your sins, and praying to God for mercy when you're in the belly of a whale. So Jonah prays one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible. While sitting in a belly full of gastric juices and rotting fish, Jonah prays: "***The engulfing waters threatened me....and when my life was ebbing away, I remembered You, O Lord, and my prayer rose up to You.... 'Those who cling to worthless idols, forfeit the grace that IS theirs'. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord.***" At this, the Lord commanded the whale to vomit Jonah up onto the beach!

And now, with seaweed stuck in his hair, and whale juices dripping off of him, Jonah now heads to Ninevah to preach the Word of the Lord to the Ninevites. And when He did, the Bible tells us that in one day, the entire city, including the King, repented in sack-cloth and ashes, and everyone prayed to God for mercy. And guess what? God had mercy on the entire city of Ninevah, and did not bring on them the destruction He had threatened. You see, we have a Savior Who always has the cross and forgiveness up His sleeve, and He's ready to play it on every hand; if we'll just play the cards he dealt us, and share Jesus with people a lot less dangerous than the Ninevites. **Page 3**

Now, you'd think Jonah would be happy, wouldn't you? But He wasn't. He told God in Jonah 4, "***I knew this was going to happen! That's why I ran in the opposite direction to Spain. I know how You are! You are gracious and compassionate! You're slow to anger, and abounding in love. And I knew you'd let the Ninevites off the hook, and forgive them their sins.***" Jonah is like we are often times, believing we deserve forgiveness, but others don't! Believing we're better, and others aren't! We'd rather than welcome "*their kind*" into our church, pastor. But God's people are not called to be a cozy country club of the frozen chosen. We are to be the Billboard of God's all-inclusive grace, mercy, and forgiveness to all the world! And if you don't want to have anything to do with that, God may have to throw you overboard, from the ship of His church also, and have you spend some time in a whale's belly; until you catch a clearer vision of God's goal for your life, in helping others to see that they're also included in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Finally, the book of Jonah ends with God asking Jonah this question: "***Shouldn't I be concerned about the Ninevites also?***" It took Jonah three days and three nights in whale belly gastric juices to finally get it. What will it take for you and I to get it, that '*Jesus' salvation isn't just for us, but for the whole world.*' Inside the belly of a whale Jonah finally got it, and he said, and listen closely to Jonah's words. He said, "***Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that IS theirs.***" Did you catch it? Grace is already theirs too! Everyone's included in Jesus' death over our sin, and Jesus' resurrection over our death, before anyone is excluded, by their refusal of the gift.

Jesus didn't come to redeem the redeemable, save the salvageable, or reconcile the reconcilable. There were none! He came to save this entire unworthy, undeserving world, in His innocent suffering and death, and His victorious resurrection. And He got the job done! Sadly, like Jonah, we don't always want to hear that Jesus saved the whole world on Calvary's cross. Sometimes, when you preach to respectable, religious types, that God has reconciled this whole screwed up world to Himself in the death of Jesus, they'll act like you're preaching heresy. We may insist: "*God shouldn't be that loving, or forgive others that easily!*" But, like it or not, as Colossians 1 says, "***God made peace with the whole world, through Christ's blood, shed on the cross.***" God is at peace with everyone in Jesus. But that doesn't mean everyone's going to heaven. Everyone can still lose the grace that is already theirs' if they don't know the gift IS theirs', or if they don't want it. And that's where you and I enter the picture. **Page 4**

“Are you saying that there’s no one, for whom Jesus didn’t die?” That’s right. But that means there’s no room for playing favorites? Right again! When the Lord tells us in Philemon 1, “***I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith,***” what’s the first thing that comes to mind? Like Jonah, we call up our Travel Agent, and try to ‘Book A Cruise’ during the week the church is planning on canvassing the neighborhood. Like Jonah, when God opens a door for us to invite a friend or family member to church, we high-tail-it out of town, and head to Red Lobster, rather than a Whale’s belly! But if everyone is already forgiven in the death of Jesus, and already risen from the dead in the resurrection of Jesus, which they are; and they only way they won’t be saved is if they don’t know it, or believe it, now do you see why God is sending Jonah and each of us to the world: to tell other who don’t have a clue that they’re already forgiven in the death of Jesus. Sadly, we often don’t even want to talk to our own children or grandchildren about the need for Jesus, and the forgiveness that is already theirs’ in Jesus, so that we can have peace in the family. But maintaining that peace could cost our children and grandchildren their salvation in Jesus.

Did you ever notice that when Jesus called His disciples to be “*fishers of men*”, He didn’t have pole fishing in mind. No! Those that Jesus called fished with nets, not poles. Jesus had net fishing in mind. And in net fishing, you cast your net into the water, and then you haul up whatever is in the net: old tires, beer cans, rubber boots, you name it. That’s the kind of fishing Jesus asks us to do. Net fishing. We are to cast out the net of Jesus’ death and resurrection over the whole world. And then try to drag everyone in, and then we let God deal with those who want to swim away from Him. Net fishing is an indiscriminate type of fishing, in which no one is excluded from the net of Jesus’ forgiving death, and victorious resurrection. We’re fishing for everyone!

Which brings me to a true story that I’d like to share with you, as I begin to close. It was told by a Methodist minister, William Willimon, at Duke University. It’s the true story of Helen and Gladys, retired school teachers, who in their spare time would canvass the neighborhoods around their church. They went out with pamphlets, and with a street assigned to them by the Pastor. One day, Helen and Gladys were clearly told to go down Summit Drive, and turn left. The Pastor was very clear about this. Do not turn left, but turn right. Go down Summit Drive, and turn right. Did you hear me Gladys? Turn right. Okay?

So Helen and Gladys went out. And when they got to Summit Drive, you guessed it. They turn left, instead of right, and headed into one of the city's housing complexes. And there they met a woman in her twenties, named Verleen. And Verleen had never been invited to church. So they invited her, and Verleen was eager to come, and did!

The next Sunday, Verleen and her two children arrive at church. They were noisy and disruptive, because they weren't used to sitting through church, much to the dismay of the regular church-goers, as seen in the cock-eyed looks that Verleen received. And during the Bible study that morning, which was on temptation, Pastor Willimon asked if anyone had ever faced temptation. One lady told how she had accidentally left the store with a loaf of bread she hadn't paid for, and how, for just a moment, she was tempted to walk away and keep it, before she decided to go back and pay for it. The Pastor nodded his approval. Another person told how he had found a wallet in the Mall parking lot, and was tempted to keep it, but turned it back in instead. Against the pastor nodded with approval.

And then Verleen spoke up, "Well, a couple of year ago, I was into drugs real bad. And my boyfriend, not the one I live with now, but the one I lived with then, who's the daddy of my oldest child, well, we robbed a gas station one night to get more money for drugs. And it was like taking candy from a baby. So my boyfriend says to me, 'Let's go rob the 7-11 up the street. And somethin' inside me says, 'No! I ain't gonna do that no more! And so he beat me up right there in the middle of the street. But it felt great to say 'NO', cause it was the only time in my life I felt like somebody.'"

At that moment you could hear a pin drop! Pastor Willomon said, "Thanks for sharing that Verleen." And they closed with prayer. On the way out of church Gladys had a smile on her face, and said to the pastor, "*Pastor, I can't wait to invite others this week. Your Bible classes used to be dull, but we're gonna have great attendance, with this kind of stuff.*" And the pastor just smiled.

The book of Jonah is a reminder that God made peace with the whole world in the death of Jesus. And Jesus has forgiven everyone with his blood, including all of the Ninevites and Verleens of this world, who haven't got a clue that they're wanted, loved, forgiven, and saved, until someone takes a left turn, instead of a right. Amen.