

Third Sunday after Epiphany – Lectionary 3
5:30 p.m. Saturday, January 21, 2012
The Reverend John H. Brock
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah, of Somerset, saying "Go at once to Guadalajara, that Mexican province, and cry out against the drug trafficking and the human smuggling, and the slaughter of innocents, for their wickedness has come before me." Jonah immediately went to his bank, withdrew all his money, got in his car and drove to the Baltimore airport, where he purchased a one-way ticket to Reykjavik, Iceland.

Shortly into the flight, the captain came on the speakers: "Ladies and Gentlemen, we're being rerouted. It appears a freak Nor'easter has appeared out of nowhere and has socked in the entire East coast. We've been rerouted over to Chicago. We should be landing there within 30 minutes."

Once on the ground they got parked on the runway. "Ladies and Gentlemen, we are experiencing a breakdown of our instruments. It seems to be a good thing that we got rerouted, because I don't think that we would have made it to New York, much less Reykjavik. We're continuing to have difficulties—we can't even get you into the terminal."

Jonah called over one of the flight attendants. "It's me," he said. "I'm the problem. Get me off the plane, and you will be just fine." The flight attendant, of course, did not believe him, but she went and got the copilot, who came and talked to him.

"Excuse me sir. Do you mean that you've sabotaged the plane? Are you a terrorist or something?"

"No!" explained Jonah. "God told me to bring his message to the Drug Lord and people in Mexico and instead I'm heading to Reykjavik. Now just get me off the plane and you'll be just fine."

"I'm sorry sir," said the co-pilot, "we can't do that just now." Jonah stood up. "Sir, if you **do not** sit down, we will have to escort you off the plane." "Thank You Very Much!" Jonah exclaimed.

The sky marshals came and escorted him into the terminal, where they began to question him.

On the plane, meanwhile, the captain suddenly announced: "Ladies and Gentlemen, it appears that all of our instruments have come back online, the East Coast just opened up, the tower has cleared us for takeoff, so we will be on our way."

Jonah was eventually released, once the TSA could find no reason to hold him. So he began thinking alternative transportation. He eventually came across a missionary cargo supply plane that was heading to the Northwest Territories. "We don't have any passenger seats," they told him. "You'll have to sit in back, with the livestock." "No problem," he said.

They were in the air for half an hour when the pilot came on, "Seems like we are being rerouted. A bizarre snowstorm is dumping about two feet of snow everywhere north of the Canadian border. Chicago has been socked in by fog, so they are shipping us south, toward Kansas City. We are going to head into a lot of turbulence, but try to sit back and enjoy the ride." As he sat there surrounded by airsick pigs and none too happy looking cattle, all of which were letting him know just *how* unhappy they were by the amount of, let us say "stuff," coming out of the back end, which of course was not staying there, and soon Jonah himself was covered in the foul smelling, acidic excrement.

Jonah begins to pray. "All right Lord. I know that you can hear me. I know too, that you're trying to tell me something. There are times when I feel all alone, but I know that even when I *feel* alone, you are indeed right there with me. There is nowhere that I can run that you aren't already there. I will go where you send me, Lord. I will do what you tell me."

The pilot came on. "I'm not certain how this happened. We are running low on fuel, and we are going to have to land, but somehow, in the midst of this *highly* unusual weather, our instruments have malfunctioned, and we are *way* off course. It appears (ahem) that we will be landing in . . . Mexico."

They landed, and seeing that he was covered in pig dung and cow poop, the customs officials dealt with Jonah in a *very* expedited fashion. Barely stopping to clean himself up, Jonah made his way to the city, finding it to be much bigger than he had expected. He walked for a day, and was only a third of the way in, but that was enough for him. He stopped at an intersection, crowded with people, stood on a small box he had found, and said in a very loud voice, "Listen up people! Forty days; forty days, that's it, and the Lord God is going to deal with you!" (Well, O.K., he said it in Spanish, but you get what I mean). With that, he turned, walked back to the edge of the city, found himself a shack, sat down and waited for the destruction to begin.

Only, it didn't. Word got around. Quickly. Things began to change. People stopped being afraid of the Drug Lord. They started to go to the churches, and they began to pray. They started looking out for each other and telling the Drug Lord's minions to 'go away, to stop threatening us and stop killing us.' When the Drug Lord heard about this crazy, dung-smelling gringo who gave this message, with no guns, with no bloodshed, with no drugs; just the simple message. And when he was told of

what the people themselves were doing: that they were now more afraid of the message than they were of him, he thought, 'maybe there is something to this message.' He stopped how he had been living, and began to pray himself. And, a change came over the entire region.

Now when this happened, and the Lord God saw how they changed from their evil ways, the mind of God was changed, concerning the calamity that was about to happen, and God did not do it.

That did not sit well with Jonah. Jonah was ready for hell-fire and brimstone. He wanted the Drug Lord and all these people to *pay* for their transgressions. Jonah wanted some good old fashioned shock and awe. He did **not** want forgiveness, passion, grace. "Are you kidding me Lord? This is why I tried to go to Reykjavik. I *knew* you were going to do this, I *knew* you that you were a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, abounding instead fast love, ready to relent from punishment. Just kill me now. Just get it over with, because I cannot stomach this."

"Jonah," said God, "What is up with you? Is it right for you to be so angry?" Jonah stomped away, angry as a hornet and set up camp on the east side of town. So, God, being God, causes this: God causes a bush to grow up overnight and shade Jonah from the hot, Mexican day. But, then the next night, God causes the bush to die. So then the *following* morning, when the sun begins to blaze out on him, Jonah whines: "What's with this heat? I would rather be dead than endure this."

So God gives Jonah a theological dope slap. "Tell me, Jonah: what gives you any right to be angry about the bush? You did *nothing* to bring about its existence, and you whined about its passing. Yet, here you are, all concerned about this bush. Should not I, the Lord God, be as equally concerned about the people here in Guadalajara, about how they live, about how they treat one another? Shouldn't I be as concerned about their well-being, at *least* as much as you are about this plant? Because they are my **people**, my **children**, most of whom are not involved in the drug trade, or human trafficking, let alone all the animals, who live here.

So, O.K., that is really not the book of Jonah, but it is. You can exchange Nineveh for Guadalajara; Tarshish for Reykjavik; a big fish for a plane. The essence of the story, though, is that God calls all of us. It's part of our baptism, it's part of being a believer: that God calls to us to a witness. A witness of God's forgiveness. A witness of God's compassion. A witness of God's Grace. Not just to the people that we like. Not just to the people with whom we get along, but to **all** people. And that's not an easy thing. When someone cuts in front of me at Giant and they have a cart full of stuff and I only have six items; when I am driving on Rt. 283 and some yutz passes me doing at least 85 mph; when I hear of someone who earns more for one speaking engagement than what I make in a year; or when I see a child being yelled at by an overwhelmed parent; when I find that one thing that I have been looking for and I realize that I have a choice - That I can live up to the pledge that I made, or that I can purchase this one thing that I have been trying to find, because you know I can always *double* my pledge next week - when I'm embarrassed to bow down my head at the restaurant and give a quick word of thanks; when I think

I might be belittled or even physically assaulted if I make a public display of my faith.

Serving God is not without risk. We only need to look at all of the prophets, not just Jonah, to realize that. Serving God is not without its rewards, either. We only need to taste the bread, smell the wine, feel the water, to experience the forgiveness and to truly know the grace that God gives to all of us.

AMEN.

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