

Lutheran Church of the Master
580 Kuhn Road, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188
Curt Gerald, Interim Pastor
January 24/25, 2009
The Third Sunday after Epiphany
"Hope for the Future"

Jonah 3 - Maybe God Will Change His Mind

1-2 Next, God spoke to Jonah a second time: "Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh! Preach to them. They're in a bad way and I can't ignore it any longer." 3 This time Jonah started off straight for Nineveh, obeying God's orders to the letter.

Nineveh was a big city, very big—it took three days to walk across it.

4 Jonah entered the city, went one day's walk and preached, "In forty days Nineveh will be smashed."

5The people of Nineveh listened, and trusted God. They proclaimed a citywide fast and dressed in burlap to show their repentance. Everyone did it—rich and poor, famous and obscure, leaders and followers.

10 God saw what they had done, that they had turned away from their evil lives. He did change his mind about them. What he said he would do to them he didn't do.

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Psalms 62:5-12 (The Message)

5-6 God, the one and only—

I'll wait as long as he says.

Everything I hope for comes from him,
so why not?

He's solid rock under my feet,

breathing room for my soul,

An impregnable castle:

I'm set for life.

7-8 My help and glory are in God

—granite-strength and safe-harbor-God—

So trust him absolutely, people;

lay your lives on the line for him.

God is a safe place to be.

9 Man as such is smoke, woman as such, a mirage.

Put them together, they're nothing; two times nothing is nothing.

10 And a windfall, if it comes— don't make too much of it.

11 God said this once and for all; how many times Have I heard it repeated?
"Strength comes Straight from God."

12 Love to you, Lord God!
You pay a fair wage for a good day's work!

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

29-31 I do want to point out, friends, that time is of the essence. There is no time to waste, so don't complicate your lives unnecessarily. Keep it simple—in marriage, grief, joy, whatever. Even in ordinary things—your daily routines of shopping, and so on. Deal as sparingly as possible with the things the world thrusts on you. This world as you see it is on its way out.

Mark 1:14-20

14-15 After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee preaching the Message of God: "Time's up! God's kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message."

16-18 Passing along the beach of Lake Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew net-fishing. Fishing was their regular work. Jesus said to them, "Come with me. I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass." They didn't ask questions. They dropped their nets and followed.

19-20 A dozen yards or so down the beach, he saw the brothers James and John, Zebedee's sons. They were in the boat, mending their fishnets. Right off, he made the same offer. Immediately, they left their father Zebedee, the boat, and the hired hands, and followed.

"How is it going?"

I was given a copy of "a brief history of the Lutheran Church of the Master" a couple weeks ago, so I was looking at that this week. It is a list that starts back in July 1965 when Rev James Lundeen started the work of a mission developer here. The last item in the list was November 30, 2008 - "Rev Curt Gerald installed as Interim Pastor."

But when I thought about today's lessons, I realized that that brief history, in some ways, is inaccurate. I'd suggest that this mission really has its roots back in the Jonah which is the greatest evangelism story ever told. It is too bad so many people use it as a proof text ... I saw some whales last week on the cruise to Mexico ... and I really don't care if a person could live in one of their bellies for a couple of days. Jonah really isn't about whales ... it is really about being a reluctant disciple ... God wants Jonah to go to the people of Nineveh ... Jonah knows they are bad folk so he doesn't want to go ... so Jonah decides to take the fast boat in the entirely opposite direction ... and on the way a storm identifies Jonah as a refugee from God so he is thrown overboard ... and God sends a taxi with flippers to bring him reluctantly back to shore and then God says: "Now, are you ready to go to Nineveh?" So Jonah reluctantly goes ... quietly speaks ... and the people repent ... and Jonah pouts ... and God changes his mind on behalf of the people.

And then we have this Gospel story that tells us about when Jesus comes along and invites his disciples out on a fishing expedition ... except it isn't for fish ... and it isn't limited to the lakes or rivers ... but Jesus asks them to follow him and through that invitation he invites everyone to follow him ... and that invitation is the one that was included in the work of developing a mission here ... and then disciples reading from 1 Corinthians gives a sense of urgency ... like ... do it NOW.

So as we prepare for (tomorrow's/today's) congregational meeting, perhaps we need to make sure we have it in focus. Sometimes we like to think that an annual meeting is the time for the members of the congregation to tighten down the screws of the congregation and hold someone accountable for each line item of the budget ... especially when it comes to next year's budget.

But I want to remind you of something ... in this organization there is only one share-holder ... and it isn't I ... and it isn't you! It is God. So as we meet (tomorrow/today) I hope we have a sense that in and through this meeting God is present ... and God is looking at this report and holding it before our eyes and saying: "well, how did I do? How is it going?" And part of what God hopes we will do is celebrate what God is doing through us ... and that we have the opportunity to share in this ministry with God!

A year ago these reports said that LCOM would run out of money before the end of 2008. Well, I have a sense today that God would say: that isn't an option for me and that wasn't my idea. So ... please give me (God) a round of applause for providing for you. By the way, have you read Malachi 3:10 lately? Do you really think you can out give God?

As a congregation, we always need to remember that the Mission of this divine Developer has always exceeded the abilities of the ones into whose hands the mission has been entrusted: the church. One of the things I have always enjoyed about conferences at the Crystal Cathedral is that Bob Schuller is always saying that if the mission is one that we know we can handle, then it doesn't need God. The church can know the mission is of God if we know that there is no way we can do it ... then God always shows up.

And God DOES show up here ... and God HAS shown up here ... like last Monday night when 19 young people and their parents came to register for this year's mission trip ... or last Wednesday when the confirmands filled these floors as they were lining up the separated sheets of paper that Jim had prepared which named the events in Jesus' life ... and they tried to put them in proper order ... (and through the process we all discovered that you just can't take events from the three Gospels and blend them into one listing ... which, by the way, the early church referred to as a heresy).

So this is a day to celebrate the ministry ... the work ... that God has been doing and is doing in this place in these days.

This is a day to be reminded that the word ministry is not limited to specific ministers ... neither all of us who are ministers by virtual of our baptism or those of us who have been called into the ordained ministry. I think there are some here who feel that the congregation lost its ministry or its mission when a previous pastor left ... and there are some who disagree with the ministry or mission while the next pastor was here ... and some of both have quit supporting this congregation's mission either because one pastor left or because another pastor was here. But you know what ... the mission was not about them ... and maybe there are some folks who still need to let them go ... after all, they both wrote letters of resignation and are now serving elsewhere in the Church in congregations to which the Lord of the Church has called them. But the ministry and the mission here still continues ... and this weekend the Lord of the Church is looking at this church and saying: "How are we doing?"

Now the Lord of the Church has invested into the Church, which is referred to in Scripture as the Body of Christ, more than is necessary to take care of what the Lord wants to get done. And in those same

scriptures, between Genesis ("beginnings") and the Revelation ("Eschatology"), are found principles of Biblical stewardship that help the Church do what it is called and sent to do. During the next month, we're going to be talking about those principles of Biblical stewardship ... and I hope you'll let me share them with you during those weeks.

Those principles are just as important now as they have ever been because, and you and I know, times are tough today ... that is, after all, what we heard clearly communicated by our new President on Tuesday in case we hadn't heard it clearly enough from our former President or from the daily reports from Wall Street or from the home foreclosures on our streets, job losses in our companies, or cut backs in our schools.

These are days when the Scriptural reference to being wise as serpents and innocent as doves needs daily application ... we need to walk carefully ... but we still need to walk!

One of the things I'll share with you is that there is no better time than now to hear about Biblical proportionate stewardship ... because Scripture never asks us to give more than we have ... it doesn't ask for us to make pledges that we may be unable to keep ... but it does invite us to make a promise based on a proportionate amount to what we are making. If you are unemployed ... now is the time to make a Biblical proportionate promise ... make a promise next month to give 5% or 10% realizing that 10% of nothing is nothing. But then, when you get a job again ... what would that 10% be?

A stewardship consultant I knew in my internship days was leading a stewardship emphasis in our congregation in Cottage Grove, Minnesota, and one of the things he said is: "I've never met a griper who tithed, and I've never met a tither who griped."

A basic assumption of an annual meeting is that I ... you ... you ... have been a part of the ministry. Here in worship regularly ... here at the communion table regularly ... and here in first fruit proportionate giving either through weekly envelopes or through Thrivent's "Simply giving" so that my offering gets here even when I don't. So as we come together, we gather to celebrate what God has made possible through our giving.

I'm pretty sure today that God knows that things are tough in the world today ... as a matter of fact, that is why the church is here. That is why we have this mission. That is why we are a mission outpost for the Gospel. And mission isn't limited to or by money.

We were on a cruise last week ... we were there among the rich and the wealthy ... because we are rich and wealthy ... oh, maybe not as wealthy as we would like to be ... and on paper, not as wealthy as we were a year ago ... but if we were not rich and wealthy, we wouldn't have been on that cruise! You know what I mean ... and I know that several of you have been on cruises too because you have told me so this last week. I always look around at my rich and wealthy friends and wonder: do they belong to a church or synagogue or mosque? I wonder when push comes to shove ... do they cut church first ... or do they decide to cancel a cruise?

Most Lutherans are pretty rich and wealthy ... and most of us are concerned right now because our pension plans have taken a major hit and we are watching the market ... but the truly poor in the world have neither pension plans to funds in the market to watch. For the truly poor, nothing has changed ... except that it has become harder for them to find help when so many not for profit helping organizations closed up.

So in this annual meeting, I think God is certainly aware of the uncertainty of the times in which the Church is currently walking ... but I also don't think God is going to let us off the hook! There is a lot of good news in this year's report ... preschool students loved, empty pantries filled, classes taught, music sung and played, worship opportunities provided, building maintained, snow plowed, and all that.

But you know what—God isn't done with us yet! There is still so much to do. Fortunately it isn't just up to us ... we're one in 11,000 ELCA congregations ... and the ELCA is one in dozens of Lutheran churches ... and those Lutheran Churches are just a small part of the Church (both the East and the West) ... and the mission is shared by our Jewish cousins and our Muslim relatives whom we don't know very well.

This may be a time in which we need to learn to work, think, decide, and act differently. We may need to reach out to other ELCA congregations ... and find ways of sharing with those churches with which we are in full communion (Episcopal, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Moravian, Reformed Church of America, and hopefully the United Methodist Church after this summer's Churchwide Assembly of which I am a member).

We certainly must be aware of the uncertainty of this moment. Today an inner city small (fewer than 24 in worship) congregation is voting to terminate its mission and ministry ... the congregation I belong to is voting on a budget about \$50,000 less than last year's and considering what it means for its mission and ministry ... and there is another congregation that is voting to move into a capital campaign in order to accommodate its mission and ministry.

And here we are ... that alone today is worthy of celebration ... but I don't think that our mission and ministry is anywhere near completed

yet. So, in the words of Scripture slightly altered, "come now, let us celebrate together and let us work together."

The fishing expedition is still on ... the world is constantly changing ... like Jonah, it would be easier to decide to go the other way ... but God could still send that whale after us to say: "NOW, are you ready to go where I want you to go and to do what I want you to do?"

Like Jonah, we may be reluctant ... but ... let's go!