

January 21, 2024
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Mark 1:14–20 (Jonah 3:1–5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29–31)

THE TIME IS FULFILLED AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND.

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

Some people are procrastinators. Other live with a sense of urgency. It's true that procrastination isn't a very good habit in this temporal life. But there is *no debate* about the disastrous results of procrastination when it comes to matters of eternal life. There are many people all over the world who know that God's Word teaches that:

"... the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

But many remain indifferent to the thought of eternal death and damnation. They think they can wait till waning hours of their life to "*get things right with God.*" But life happens fast, and sudden death catches many unawares, like the man in Jesus' ***Parable of the Rich Fool***. He planned to tear down his barns and build larger ones to store up all his wealth for years so that he could relax, eat, drink, and be merry. The man planned on everything but an early death. He placed his trust in his riches instead of trusting in God. (cf: Luke 12:13–21) In other cases, folks have disbelieved in the Gospel for so long that in old age they cannot believe. It is not that God won't let them have faith. It's their own stubbornness that rejects the call of the Holy Spirit.

There is a sense of urgency that runs through all of our Scripture readings today. Time is short. God is going to act. Four times in the book of Revelation St John records Jesus saying:

"I am coming soon." (Revelation 3:11, 22:7, 12, 20)

You've been warned. There is no excuse. But you and I don't always live as if today might be our last day on earth. We ***talk*** like we believe Jesus is coming soon, but most times we lack a sense of urgency. We talk and talk and talk about how we need to spread the Good News of the love God has for us in Christ Jesus, but all we do is talk about it. We're all talk and no do. We don't share the Good News of forgiveness of sins and salvation in Jesus among those who don't know Jesus. Unfortunately, time is running out.

Time was running out for the people of Nineveh, but Jonah didn't want to bear the news. Within all of scripture, Jonah is the only prophet who blatantly disobeyed God's call. God told him to go to Nineveh and call the people to repentance, but he ran the opposite direction.

In the days of Jonah, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, a powerful, ruthless and sinful city. Jonah didn't want to be God's messenger. He knew that the people there were enemies of Israel so in his mind, it was no big deal if God destroyed them. So instead heeding God's call, he jumped on a ship bound for Tarshish where he'd be far from the people of Nineveh – and where ***he thought*** he'd be far away from God. Jonah underestimated the gracious love of God. He didn't understand that God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone but desires all people to be

saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (cf: Ezekiel 18:32; 1 Timothy 2:4) Even all your enemies today.

God sent such a great storm upon the sea that it seemed that the ship would break apart. (cf: Jonah 1:4) When the ship's crew found out that Jonah was running away from God, they threw him overboard. Immediately the wind and waves calmed. (cf: Jonah 1:9–15) And in His rich love, mercy, and grace, God appointed a great fish to swallow the rebellious Jonah, saving him in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. (cf: Jonah 1:17) Jonah prayed to God from inside the fish, and God heard his prayer. God spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out on the dry land. (cf: Jonah 2:1–10)

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, telling him to go to Nineveh and be God's mouthpiece, calling the people to repentance. (cf: Jonah 3:1–2) This time, Jonah heeded God's call.

“And [Jonah] called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”
(Jonah 3:4)

Immediately the Holy Spirit, working through God's Word, convinced the people of Nineveh to turn from their sin and repent. They showed God just how sorry they were for their sins by fasting and putting on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least. When God saw their sorrow and repentance, He had mercy on them and didn't destroy them. (cf: Jonah 3:5–10)

Some critics consider the story of Jonah to be “*The original big fish story!*” They say it's a fable and never happened. But it's a real historical event. Jesus Himself attested to the veracity of the story saying:

“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”
(cf: Matthew 12:40)

The book of Jonah demonstrates God's divine love and mercy. He is patient and longsuffering toward undeserving sinners, wanting all to come to repentance. He saved the pagan sailors from the fatal effects of the storm, and in turn, they feared God, and offered sacrifices to Him. (cf: Jonah 1:16) God saved the rebellious Jonah from death and Sheol. (cf: Jonah 2, 6–7) And God converted the people of Nineveh to faith in Him by means of His Word, preached by Jonah.

There're many parallels between Jonah and our lives. Many times like Jonah, you don't want to heed God's Word. You turn your back on Him and run in the opposite direction. God may not have called you to be a pastor, but He does call you in your vocation, whatever your station is in life, to share the Good News of salvation in Christ Jesus with others. Perhaps you procrastinate, filling your time with other things you believe must be done. Or you prefer to be a ***Christian incognito***. You keep your faith invisible. You don't want to make waves or make anyone mad. But if you and I truly loved our neighbors as ourselves, we'd want our friends and loved ones to know that there is a heaven and there is a hell. The time has grown very short.

Most times we're like the people of Nineveh. We daily sin much and don't give it a second thought. You want to live by your own rules rather than heed God's Word in Scripture. You classify one sin as greater than another, thinking that the things you do ***aren't that offensive*** to

God. You think: “*Surely God understands why I’m doing this. Besides, I have plenty of time to repent of my sins, but right now, I’m having too much fun.*” You and I lack a sense of urgency.

Through Jonah, God gave the people of Nineveh a forty-day warning of their pending doom and they responded **immediately**. They didn’t wait for the last couple days or until the clock ran down to the last few seconds. They heard the Word of God, they were stuck by the guilt of their sin, and they repented.

St. Paul was also called by God’s to be His mouthpiece. Wherever he went he preached with a sense of urgency. In our epistle text he says:

“... the appointed time has grown very short.” (1 Corinthians 7:29)

“... the present form of this world is passing away.” (1 Corinthians 7:31)

Paul had lived a murderous life as a Pharisee. (cf: Acts 9:1–2 2; Philippians 3:5–6) But like God calling the rebellious Jonah, Jesus called the murderous Paul along the road as he was traveling to Damascus, striking him temporarily blind. But Paul responded quickly to Jesus’s call. It was only a matter of a few days later that his sight was restored, and he was preaching in the synagogue that Jesus is the Son of God. (cf: Acts 9:3-20)

In our Gospel text, Jesus begins His earthly ministry with a sense of urgency:

“... saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’” (Mark 1:15)

Jesus pulls no punches. God’s kingdom... His reign and rule has come to earth in the flesh of man and His kingdom does not wait for procrastinators. Jesus doesn’t say: “*Go home and think about and I’ll get back with you next week.*” He doesn’t try to persuade or coerce or deceive. No. He saw Simon and Andrew casting a net into the sea:

“... said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.’”
(Mark 1:17)

When the King of the kingdom says, “*Follow me,*” you follow Him, no questions asked. These first disciples didn’t waste any time in responding to the call of Jesus. No.

“...immediately they left their nets and followed him.” (Mark 1:18)

And a little further down the shore, Jesus called James and John. They not only walked off the job, they left the family business... leaving their dad Zebedee **and** the hired servants sitting on the boat. They followed Jesus to become fishers of men. (cf: Mark 1:17)

Jesus’ message of 2,000 years ago is His message today.

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:15)

Regarding repentance Martin Luther writes:

“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’, He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” (LW 38. 83)

Repentance begins with confession. You admit your sinfulness and desire to change your ways to God your Father. St. John teaches us in his first epistle letter:

“If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

But you cannot repent and believe in the Gospel by our own power. It comes only through the power of the Holy Spirit working within us through Word and Sacrament. You were adopted into God's kingdom in the water of Holy Baptism where you received the Holy Spirit and faith so that you can believe in Jesus Christ your Lord through God's Holy Word.

You and I *daily* sin much, so *daily* repent of your sins as your Savior *daily* comforts you with the truth of God's Word... the truth that through *His* suffering and death He has won for you victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil. For *His* sake, your sins are forgiven and always will be forgiven... including your sins of procrastinating in sharing the Good News of salvation in Christ Jesus with others... your sin of being a Christian incognito.

All who repent and believe in the Gospel, trusting in God's reign in Christ Jesus find themselves in the Kingdom of God. God's Kingdom isn't primarily a *place*, and it doesn't come by some magical power. It's also a divine action that occurs wherever Jesus is, performing His kingly deeds of salvation through His Word, the Good News of the reign of God in Christ Jesus. (cf: Gibbs, Matthew 1:1–11:1, Concordia Commentary, 49) God's Kingdom comes invisibly and mysteriously as the Holy Spirit works faith in rebellious sinners through the hearing of the Gospel. (cf: Romans 10:17) God's Kingdom comes wherever and whenever people live through faith in Jesus. God's Kingdom also comes in the future when you join Him in eternity.

To perform His Kingly duties, Jesus Christ came in the flesh of man to fulfill all of God's promises about winning salvation for the world. He came to keep God's Law for you since you cannot keep it. He came to pay the price of your sins with His innocent suffering and precious blood that was shed upon the cross – Christ crucified for you. He has given you the Holy Spirit, enabling you to share the redeeming love and forgiveness that God has for sinners in Christ Jesus.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, time is short. The message is urgent. It's the timeless message that the Church has proclaimed throughout the centuries.

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

The Gospel of Jesus Christ delivers to you the promise of forgiveness of sins and where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.