

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Jonah 1:1-17; Matthew 8:23-27

What is the most amazing thing in our first lesson in your opinion? Is it the great storm? Is it that the sailors would throw Jonah overboard, or that Jonah would tell them to do so? Is it that Jonah was swallowed by a giant fish—and notice, the Bible says it was a giant fish, not a whale, as many assume? What strikes you as most fascinating?

I know what it is for me, and it's not any of the things I mentioned. What amazes me is that the LORD called Jonah to be his preacher, his missionary to the Ninevites. Of all the people our God could have called, why in the world would He pick Jonah. Jonah clearly doesn't want to go preach to Israel's enemies. He does everything he can to get out of the task. He mopes and pouts. He seems sincerely to want the Word not to work among the people of Nineveh, for them not to be brought to repentance, spared punishment, and saved. How in the world is he fit for the task the Lord assigns him? How could he possibly be less fit, in fact? Yet Jonah the Lord calls and sends, and Jonah the Lord brings, even through the belly of a giant fish, to Nineveh, to call Ninevites to repentance and into His grace.

God is making a powerful point in our first lesson. The power is not in the preacher, but in the Word. What matters is not the guy in the robes, but the Word in his mouth. When God's Word is spoken, even if by an unworthy pastor, even if by a pastor who doesn't really care if anyone believes, God's Word has power, because His Spirit works through it, and His Son is given by it. And that fascinates me, because it gives me a semblance of calm when I still nervously step up to the pulpit. If God could work through pouting Jonah, he can work through imperfect Wade. I just need to get out of the way, and let God's Word have its way with you.

The apostles were scared in our Holy Gospel, just like the sailors with Jonah. There was a terrible storm, and if you've ever seen a storm approaching, or been caught in a storm, while out on the water or in the forest, without any sign of safety nearby, you know a bit of what they were feeling. Even more, the water was beginning to swamp the ship. The apostles were busy, not only trying to steer their boat, but to keep it afloat. They were desperately bailing water. And what was Jesus doing? He was out cold, sleeping like a baby. And so, rightly it would seem, at least at first, they woke Him up and asked Him what gives. How could He stand by and sleep while they drowned.

But that was the problem, wasn't it? They were so focused on what Jesus was doing that they lost sight of who He was, just like when we sometimes spend so much time looking for evidence of God's hand that we forget who it is that is behind that hand. They hadn't drowned yet, had they? Sure, their feet were wet, but their heads were still above water. They weren't even treading water yet. They were still in the boat, even if their Anchor was asleep and seemed indifferent.

How could Jonah tell the sailors to throw him in the water? He must have seemed a fool, but he had God's promise. God called him to preach to Nineveh, and it was sinking in for him that, like it or not, God was going to see to it that Jonah did so. The storm had come to set Jonah back on the right path, and so Jonah knew that, whether it was through the belly of a giant fish or the swim of his life, he was going to make it to the pulpit he'd worked so hard to escape.

The apostles had a promise too. Christ hadn't come to drown at sea. What kind of gospel would that be? And Christ hadn't called them to drown at sea. Christ had come to be the Messiah, to live and die and rise for us, and the apostles had been called to be eyewitnesses of all that. And so He rebukes them when they wake Him: ***"Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?"***

And I suppose He could say the same to us. When we hesitate to keep His commands for fear that we might miss out on some fun or lose some benefit that disobedience might bring, ***"Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?"*** When we are afraid to turn the other cheek or forgive because we might appear weak, ***"Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?"*** When we are afraid to call a brother or sister to repentance when they err and stray, ***"Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?"*** When we are tempted to water down our confession of the faith to win earthly friends, ***"Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?"*** When we are afraid to discipline our children in love for fear that they might not want to be our friends, ***"Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?"*** When we shutter at the thought of loving someone even when they haven't loved as much as we'd like in return, for fear that we might not find happiness in such a relationship, ***"Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?"*** When we think that any disease can take the life that God has promised will never end, ***"Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?"***

God might seem asleep at the most inopportune times, but God is God, and He never misses a beat, and when He seems tardy His timing is just right. He is teaching. He is testing. He is turning things for our good, even if that seems impossible as the waves beat against the boat and the waters rise. Keep bailing and know that God's children don't drown. No, the very waters that drowned Pharaoh and his armies saved Moses and Israel when they were parted. So also, even as the waters rise, we who are wet with Baptism have nothing to fear. He who walked on water is in the boat with us.

But how do I know that? How can I trust Him? How do I know He will keep His Word? How do I know that His Word has the power to buoy me in such a storm? Ask Jonah, stinking of fish vomit, as He walks to Nineveh to preach a message that will bring His enemies to repentance contrary to his own personal intentions. That same powerful Word is the Word we have today, the Word at work on our hearts, even when we were enemies, not of Jonah, but of God by our sin. Listen and know that He who was crucified and, like Jonah, was buried in the belly of the grave for three days and three nights, has risen, just as He said. Be not afraid. He is with us always, and His voice that calms storms is still speaking through the Scriptures.

