**Jonah 3:1-10**

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, **2** “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” **3** So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. **4** Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” **5**  And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. **10** When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

**“The Word Saves”**

 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. How good it was that many LCMS pastors and people joined the, “March for life” at our national and state capitals last week. As Lutherans, we support the right of religious freedom to speak out against the murder of innocent children in this country. Likewise, today starts, “Lutherans schools week” celebrating the unique care for both body and soul in education. Two blessings are evident, to groom future church workers and lay leaders as well as being a place for outreach, since many attending our schools are not even Lutheran. Whether it is education or calling a nation to repentance, Lutherans teach and confess God’s Word at last and above all is the only hope for us in a sinful world.

 When we turn to the book of Jonah, such mercy of God seeks to speak to those in Nineveh. History of the city dates back to the earliest times of civilization. The ruins of Nineveh today are near Mosul in the country of Iraq. Interestingly enough, Muslims even recognize the work of Jonah dedicating shrines in honor of this prophet. God certainly was merciful to a wicked people sparing their lives. Yet, only Jesus finally reveals why God is so merciful to sinners. As Jonah stood in the midst of Nineveh, so Christ stands in a sinful world proclaiming, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” This is the work of God that His Word remains undefiled for all with salvation in His Name.

 Before we notice what Jonah preached to Nineveh, we first look at why God’s Word came to him, “a second time.” It was not because the first time God failed to speak faithfully. Matter a fact, the second time He speaks His Words were practically the same. Most know the problem. It was not God, but Jonah! He up ran away only to end up having a giant fish swallow him at sea. It was during this time of misery and darkness Jonah would declare, “Salvation belongs to the Lord!” In other words, salvation is God’s possession to give as He pleases none others. He did it for Jonah and it was to be for those in Nineveh. The verse before our opening words tells us how God prepared this prophet to receive His Word a second. “And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.” (Jonah 2:10).

 Without the Word, sinners die a silent death by the work of their hands. If the disciples had not heard the call to “Follow me,” they would have kept on fishing only to miss the faithfulness of God’s kingdom come in Christ. Jonah refusing to preach such a call to Nineveh meant certain death for those people. He defiled the Word of God not by immorality, but by not speaking! How have we done the same? Is it refusing to speak God’s love because it might offend? Is it denying to speak forgiveness because a spouse, church member, or coworker has hurt you? Is it twisting the Word to fit cultural standards to avoid suffering? Constantly, our sinful flesh drags us off to silence God’s Word. We defile it by false words and actions that do not align with the Gospel. Thank God, our comfort comes by being swallowed up by our baptism daily. It is by this watery grave of repentance God’s spits us back out with words to hear Him say, “I forgive you all your sins.”

 When God sent Jonah to Nineveh, he was to speak the message God would tell him. There was no wiggle room, no place for this prophet to bring in his own interpretation. The goal of God is to save sinners. It means neither entertaining sin nor clouding the situation with other matters. For Jonah it was to go into the city and proclaim, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” Of course, before the Gospel one must hear the Law. Like a knife, it cut those in Nineveh to the heart. “Forty days” would be the reminder of what God did at the time Noah with the flood. Likewise, to be “overthrown” carried the judgment of what fell upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Rather than concern over Jonah, “the people of Nineveh believed God.” It meant they heard the Law, but they trust to see the good news. Time had not run out. God did not pass them over. Jonah faithfully saved by a fish was now faithfully speaking for their salvation.

 God sends His Word out undefiled with salvation in His Name. He does this not by focusing on a particular person or work that save the day. Christ already says what needs to be said, “The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Matthew 12:41). A wicked people like Nineveh heard the call to repent and believed God more than Israel at the time of Christ. Can we in our times when saying, “this is my life” still hear the call to repent? Dare we take seriously the One who comes in our midst by His Word and Sacrament? Christ three days in the grave proves more faithful than three days of a man in the belly of a fish. Jesus’ death does away our death by life in His Name. The crucified Savior has removed our guilt by His suffering. God was never content with a city. His grace is to convert, to turn hearts to Him by the Word. The gift is to give His Son for all people.

 Those wearing sackcloth and ashes in Nineveh bore witness to the power of God’s Word. Jonah did not come to win over the people by his efforts. He simply made the good confession God gave Him to witness. Conversion rested on the work of the Holy Spirit who would overturn sinful hearts. This Word even affected their very lives. Luther tells us, “To turn from one’s evil way” is not a trivial work…but believing in God with all one’s heart and loving the neighbor as one’s self; that is, it demands piety and righteousness in one’s whole being, both inwardly and outwardly, in body and soul. God wants the entire person” (Luther Words Vol. 19). The truth and power of God’s Word to save does change lives by His Spirit. Rather than focusing on works, it resided in faith to see God works all good for sinners. Nineveh is the example that a light shined not from the will of men, but by the Will of God.

 Fruitful repentance witnesses to the faithful Word at work in the World. As Lutherans, we know God mercifully looks upon our infirmities and stretches out His majesty to heal and defend us always by His Word. Behind the march for life or educating children is confidence that comes from a different spirit than works of man. The Catechism tells the source, “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel.” Since the Spirit by baptism calls us to Christ, the same light shines out for others in our lives. Our actions carry words to speak truth in both Law and Gospel. For pro-life, it is to repent of murder, but to believe God reaches out in love to the saddest situations. For educating, it is to repent over the spiritual laxity toward children, but also to believe God seeks to protect with His Word in our lives.

 This is the work of God that His Word remains undefiled for all with salvation in His Name. Jonah spoke this Word in the heart of Israel’s enemies. Jesus speaks His Word for all to “follow me.” We speak to witness such faithfulness, but the work rests in God changing any to repent and believe in the Gospel. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.