

Sermon about Jonah 1-2 on 1st Sunday after Trinity 2021 in BXL (III^N)

Blessing: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Bible: (1, 1) Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, (2) "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." (3) But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. (4) But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. (5) Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. (6) So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish." (7) And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. (8) Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" (9) And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." (10) Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. (11) Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. (12) He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come

upon you.” (13) Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. (14) Therefore they called out to the Lord, “O Lord, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.” (15) So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. (16) Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. (17) And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (2, 1) Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, (2) saying, “I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. (3) For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. (4) Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’ (5) The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head (6) at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. (7) When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. (8) Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. (9) But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!” (10) And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

Prayer: We pray with Martin Luther: “We are beggars; this is true.” – Lord, Almighty and Merciful, we need your fondness. Bless us with Your Holy Spirit and bless Your Word to our hearts. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. (Amen.)

Sermon: *Opener – A human life picture:* Again, we have a popular Biblical text as passage for the sermon after Nicodemus last week or the Tower of Babylon the week before. Popular even for children's Bibles. Indeed, it is a representational passage with the big fish and on the face of it a simple message, also well understandable for children. But if we even look at this children's Bible with the story of Jonah, we see almost just sad, even terrible pictures, full of desperation and sadness. Who is this guy called Jonah? If we trace the story, we will realise that there are almost no real, historical anchor points. The person of Jonah stays strangely anonymous. And so, the duty as well: the people of the city of Nineveh are bad people, God wants Jonah to appeal to their conscience. So, God sends him. The people change their mind. Even Nineveh remains quite faceless. Yes, we know the name and we can identify the city. But nothing more, neither the bad things God blames the people for, nor the name of the king or anything else. All in all, it seems that the personality and story of Jonah is at least as important as the simple duty to call the citizens of Nineveh to repentance. Jonah becomes an archetype of a human being, one among thousands. Nineveh as well, it could be any city. It does not matter if it is the capital of Assyria, where today the city of Mosul in Iraq is. As well the name of Jonah, the name is exchangeable. It could be mine, or yours. – What are the steps of the story? God commands to do a job to Jonah. God addresses Jonah. God calls for service, to fulfil a purpose. And this is too much for Jonah. Jonah cannot cope with that. He is anxious. He falls into depression. He is running away. This is the picture I usually use for explaining sin to confirmands or pupils: running away from God, for whatever reason ever. The outcome is that Jonah is staying alone. There is no one left around him. He must trust himself to seafarers. People who he does not know. Psychologically, we would say he is immigrating into the inside or he is doing an inner resign, by fleeing and entering the ship to the most far end of the known

world. Again, the best picture for sin, as Martin Luther explained sin, in Latin “incurvatus in se ipso” – curved in myself. – The last step is that Jonah becomes suicidal. In his flight before God, he takes himself on the sea. For the Biblical World, the sea is the realm of chaos and death. For the moment, he moves at the edge of death by sailing on with the ship on the surface of the deep, dark water. – When life becomes a whole threat, when I cannot stand the tasks and duties I have been called for, by others, by God, by whom ever. When family or job or health is no longer manageable, and the voice of God seems to be more a prosecution, or I have not heard it at all. Then I might be driven into this darkness of Jonah.

1. part – Alone with God: There are these moments, when we are thrown back on ourselves, realising our own situation. Left by all others or when we have left all others. This is the case for Jonah. He realises, it’s me. I have done the wrong thing. I have not listened to God’s voice or rather I have listened, but I did not obey. But there must not be God’s voice involved necessarily. It is about realising the personal situation of not being master over life, to have failed, to be kept in depression. At this point, the particular reasons are no longer important, if other people are guilty or I myself caused my situation. – Jonah is thrown back onto himself. What did he find? Nothing but his knotted extremities. – But he remembers God. He remembers that there is someone next to him in his loneliness, the almighty God over all life. He prays (and for me it is an extraordinary prayer, wonderfully said): “I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’ The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the

mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!” – Last week, I joined the European Lutheran Conference, the church community of several confessional Lutheran churches in Europe, to build and strength our community, to discuss theological themes, to pray together. And Reverend Adalberto Hiller from Portugal told us that his brother lost his faith long ago but, in the pandemic, Adalberto’s wife sent him always the links to their services. And Adalberto said that he did not think that his brother would watch and follow the services. But when they talked about it, he said to Adalberto: “You Christians have hope, others cannot have.” And in the same direction goes a sentence a psychotherapist said to a fellow pastor of mine: “You Christians have a big advantage. You can forgive sins and to start new, something in psychotherapy is not possible.” – This, my dear Brothers and Sisters is it: When it comes to the point, when the waters close over us, when the realms of death keep us imprisoned, either emotionally or physically, we can trust in the hope of God who sees us wherever we are and who takes away all the bad and evil in and around us. Into the arms of the One who will hold us fast and who will not let us fall into the abyss of the sea.

2. part – God, master of the realm of death: God listened to Jonah. And he gave new life to Jonah who was practically dead in the stomach of the fish down in the sea. Jonah was spat out. This was like a new birth for him, coming out of the belly of the foundations of the earth. – It is clear: God is master over all – even over the realms of chaos and death and all its monsters like the big fish. God can do that because He entered and conquered this place himself: Jesus Christ was there, in the realms of chaos and death, the space most far

away from God. And Jesus Christ released all who were and are bound in this darkness and led them out into light. – Jonah could come out after three days – he was not forced to bear more than Jesus bore, when he rose from the dead on the third day.

3. part – *life can be hard but always carried by God:* Nevertheless, also his “second life” was not easy or light-hearted at all for Jonah. In German we can say, when we feel really bad, “I feel like I was spat out.” – I do not know if this comes from the story of Jonah, but it could be. And He was literally spat out on the shores of his life. And he was sent again to fulfil his purpose. Finally, Jonah was taught the hard way by God that God does not want to destroy his children and is pleased with them when they repent. (This is the content of the second half of the book and not part of our passage today.) But he had the chance to live with God again, to life and to fulfil his purpose – and he found mercy. The story of Jonah teaches us that if we are at the end in life, God is not at the end with us at all. God has a purpose for us and follows us and there is no place between heaven and earth God could not follow and rescue us. God is stronger. And He is our God, God for us, and God with us.

Blessing: The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.