

EPIPHANY 3, JANUARY 24, 2021 (LIFE SUNDAY)

Rev. Roger A. Erdman

**Lectionary Readings:** Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

**Sermon Title:** *A God of Life*

**Prayer:** *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of [our] heart[s] be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, [our] Rock and [our] Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)*

**Salutation:** Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:2)

**Text:** The Word from God through which the Holy Spirit comes to stir our hearts for Life Sunday, the Third Sunday after the Epiphany of Our Lord is from our Old Testament Reading: Jonah, chapter 3.

**Introduction:** Dear friends in Christ, there are many aspects of the true story of Jonah that are worth thinking about. Most of us know the Sunday School basics:

- That God called Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach.
- That Jonah ran away.
- That he was swallowed up by a big fish as “*fish food.*”

God then had the fish spit Jonah out on dry land – safe and sound (maybe a little smelly) – and renewed his instructions for Jonah to go and preach. That’s where our Old Testament reading picks up today.

**I.** What many forget, or never learn about the book of Jonah is the reason *why* Jonah was so reluctant. God was calling Jonah to preach in Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian empire.

And Jonah knew full well these were not nice people. They might be described as the “*Old Testament Nazis.*” You see, the Assyrians were notorious for wartime atrocities, including rape, pillaging, torture, and even cutting open the bellies of pregnant women.

Jonah knew:

- That if he was sent to Nineveh, and preached God’s word.
- That if the Ninevites repented.
- That God was a merciful God, Who would relent from His judgment and forgive their sins.

Jonah didn’t want to see that happen:

- He wanted to see fire and brimstone rain down on Nineveh, like they did when God judged Sodom and Gomorrah.
- Therefore, he didn’t want Nineveh to be forgiven.

But Jonah is made the fool by the end of the story, as God asks the rhetorical question: “*Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people... should I not be concerned about that great city?*” (Jonah 4:11). It seems Jonah, too, had something to learn about the value of God’s gift of life.

**II.** It seems, we too, have something to learn about the value of God’s gift of life. Yes, WE WHO DEBASE THE GIFT OF LIFE.

Today, we observe the infamous anniversary – January 22, 1973 – marking 48 years since *Roe v. Wade*, a United States Supreme Court decision effectively legalizing abortion. Since that date, it is estimated that up to 61 million abortions have been performed. While some progress has been made in eliminating this sinful and barbaric affront to God’s gift of life, our nation as a whole still has much to answer for when it comes to the sin of abortion.

For starters:

- Perhaps you personally know someone who has had an abortion.
- Perhaps you personally have had an abortion.

Furthermore, abortion’s effects are far ranging. One of the least talked about effects of abortion is the heavy burden of guilt it brings. We well know that it’s sinful. We know, deep down, it is terribly wrong. Many women who have abortions suffer under the weight of this guilt for years – struggling with depression and even showing higher rates of suicide.

But there is another secret which is not told often enough. There is forgiveness in Christ.

Yes, the same God who could forgive even the Ninevites, those wicked people – can forgive us even the sin of abortion. Therefore:

- If you know someone who carries this burden of guilt – don’t be the reluctant Jonah who withholds God’s forgiveness.
- If you are someone who has sinned in this way – then hear now from this called and ordained servant of the Word that Christ offers forgiveness – yes very much to *you!*

You see, Jesus’ blood shed at the cross covers all sins – even the sin of abortion. So great is His abounding mercy.

But not all of us have such personal concerns about the sin of abortion. However, this doesn’t let us off the hook. We humans are inventive when it comes to debasing God’s gift of life. Sin takes many forms. Yet, no less sinning against the Fifth Commandment, where God says through Moses: “*You shall not murder*” (Exodus 20:13).

Luther asks: *“What does this mean?”* and answers: *“We should fear and love God that we may not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.”*

This means, too, there are other ways of sinning against God’s gift of Life:

- Physically harming our neighbor in any way (by our actions).
- Failing to help when we can (by our inaction).
- Disrespecting God’s role as giver (and taker) of life – from cradle to grave (or from womb to tomb).
- Treating our own life with less value than God means for it – even to such things how we handle our health – not eating well and exercising enough.
- Doing those *“little things”* which tear away at life, contribute to our culture of death, and fail to appreciate our Creator’s handiwork.

Indeed, the gift of life is one of God’s most precious to us. For in it:

- He has created us in His own image.
- We are reflections of Him.
- All human life is therefore precious to God, and worthy of our care.
- And for all the ways we sin against human life, we need, like the Ninevites, to repent of our wicked ways.

**III.** And Just as God showed mercy to the Ninevites, God shows mercy to us. For He is: A GOD WHO GAVE HIS LIFE.

However, the Ninevites didn’t know their forgiveness was based on the work of a Christ Who was yet to come. We, however, know ours is based on the Christ Who has indeed come!

Jesus tells us the very reason He comes in John chapter 10: *“I came so that they will have life and have it overflowing in them”* (v 10b).

You see, Jesus is the God of life Who gave His life to ransom our lives:

- He gave His life on the cross to deal a death-blow to death.
- He gave His most precious life to bring us the precious gift of life in His name.

Jesus goes on to say of His life: *“No one takes it from Me. No, of My own free will I am giving it. I have power to give it, and I have power to take it back again”* (John 10:18).

And we know that He has such authority over life and death because death could not hold Him. We see His authority over death in the empty tomb of Easter. And there, with the stone rolled back and the grave left behind, we see a glimpse of our new life too. Thus, His authority over death and life is not only for Himself, it’s for our benefit too!

**IV.** For our God is: A GOD WHO GIVES NEW LIFE. You see, as Christ brings new life, He brings us a future that goes beyond the seeming end that is death.

In a world that teaches such uplifting sound-bytes as: *“Life stinks, and then you die.”* Jesus brings true hope. Death is not the end for us. There is more. A blessed, eternal, wonderful existence – *living* – with God forever.

This means life is not just a dis-embodied existence as some transient spirit:

- The Christian hope is in the resurrection of the body – yes, that’s *our* body – as we confess in the Creed.
- In the book of Job we read: *“My skin will surround this body, and from within my flesh I will see God”* (Job 19:26).

For the final hope of Christians for the future is a physical eternal life in a re-created, resurrected body!

But that life that Jesus brings is more than just a future hope. You see:

- Eternal life, for the Christian, begins not when we die and go to heaven – it begins in the waters of Baptism, as we are reborn in the Holy Spirit.
- Therefore, our life with God, our eternal life, is something we enjoy even now – though we will see it even more fully in the new heaven and new earth.

We might say as Martha did at the tomb of Lazarus: *“Yes, Jesus, I know about the...resurrection at the Last Day.”* To which He would answer us as He did her: *“I am the Resurrection and the Life. Anyone Who believes in Me will live, even if he dies. Yes, anyone who lives and believes in Me will never die”* (John 11:25-26a).

**Conclusion:** Dear friends in Christ, as we lament a particular day, 48 years ago, in which human life was dealt a mighty blow – let us also turn from our sins against God’s gift of life.

And let us remember a day 2000 years ago, in which sin and death itself were dealt the final blow. As Jesus gave His life for ours, and brought new life in abundance, may we ever treasure the precious gift of life – life here in time, and the life to come.

In the name of T Jesus, Who forgives all your sins. Amen.

***To God alone the Glory!***