

## Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany One Year Series

January 29, 2017

### Luther

32. This, then, is a most wonderful lesson for those who earnestly desire to be Christians. From it we should learn that when storms rage, Christ will not only be there ready to help us, but great blessing and glorious fruit will also result. That has been so for us, and from personal experience we have learned the power and virtue of the word and faith. Psalm 50:15 states, "Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me," and Psalm 91:15, "He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honor him." If you wish to be a Christian, you will certainly experience trials. However, if you call upon Christ in time of need, he will hear you, rescue you, and cause your trial to bear blessed fruit and great glory. For the present every necessity is met; and later, eternal life will follow. It bothers the old Adam greatly; he does not willingly submit to wind and waves on the sea, and would rather remain on shore, indeed it's always the same: time of need must always come first, then follows rescue and glory.

33. Dear Father in heaven, grant this to all of us for Christ's sake, through his Holy Spirit. Amen.

*(Luther's House Postils. Vol. 1. Ed.: E. Klug. Baker Publishing, 1996. P. 263.)*

### Collect of the Day

Almighty God, You know we live in the midst of so many dangers that in our frailty we cannot stand upright. Grant strength and protection to support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptation; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*This prayer is used more than once in our lectionary and the idea is written large in Lutheran theology. We are incapable, only God is truly capable. Our capabilities come only from Him. Of course, as we have previously noted, this runs somewhat contrary to our culture. The preacher will want to identify what are the dangers in the face of which our frailty is to be seen. For first century Christians who were frequently persecuted, the dangers and temptations would have been pretty obvious. For us it might be a little less clear. What is a danger for one may not be for another. What is a temptation or a problem in one place may not be universally so. What does it mean that we cannot stand upright? What has us hunched over like dowagers and old men shuffling down the halls of a nursing home? Not a picture I like to think about myself, but the prayer forces me. What has bent me over? Is it my fear? Is it my pride which refuses God's help? Is it my stunted prayer development or greed?*

*We want strength and protection to support us in danger and carry us in temptation. Notice the switch there. I would normally pray for someone to carry me through danger and support me in*

*temptation. But my shock at the word order really says something about my latent belief in my own abilities. I think I only need support in temptation because I believe I can resist. But the prayer gets this right. The temptations are the greater problem for us. That is where God really needs to carry us. The dangers are not as problematic. After all if the Devil takes my life, I am in God's hands. Is it perhaps the temptations which would give me occasion to lose that most precious gift of faith? Is that the real temptation? Is it the self-assured modernity which scoffs at the idea of miracles and suggests that anyone who actually believes such a thing is a troglodyte and belongs in some backwoods hut deep in the fundamentalist South? Is it the post-modern assertion that all is good, and if you suggest that all is not good, you are an intolerant monster who has no place in this society? What tempts our folks today to shipwreck their faith?*

*What are the dangers for which we need support and the temptations in which we need to be carried? Do any of our people see them? Do they seem them that way? How will we preach about this?*

## **Readings**

Jonah 1:1-17

<sup>1</sup> Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” <sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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.”

<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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?” <sup>9</sup> 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.” <sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup> So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.<sup>16</sup> Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

## **Luther**

I commend the following as an allegory for your meditation and careful attention. For Christ Himself in the gospel applies this example of Jonah to Himself. He indicates that Jonah pointed to Him when He says, Matt. 12:39-40: “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was, etc.” This is an exceptionally wonderful story. Even Christ seems to have been delighted with it, and this is evident in that very same chapter of Matthew. When He mentions the men of Nineveh, Christ is surely speaking in a wonderful way about this story. And so this story is well known in both Testaments. Christ came into “the sea,” that is, into the world. And when He had come into the world, “the sea” was disturbed because of him, since the Son of God was received by some but not by others. He was devoured by “a large fish,” that is, by Satan, the ruler of this world. For Satan and hell and death “swallowed” Christ when He was hanging on the cross, as if they would destroy Him, but He could not be held by them, for that was impossible, as Peter says, Acts 2:24. And so it was necessary for Him “to be vomited up.” He came back to life, and this became an opportunity for life, which before had been an opportunity for death. In this way death has become the door to life for us; disgrace has become the elevation to glory; condemnation and hell, the door to salvation. And this has happened through Christ, who was sinless, etc.

To Christ be praise and glory!

(Luther's Works Vol. 19. CPH. P. 31.)

*I find Luther's comments above very interesting for a couple of reasons, not the least of which is that he simply launches into an allegorical interpretation. Our recent denomination tilt into modernity called all such interpretation into question and I find it refreshing that Luther can read his text, analyze every word, and then go full bore allegorical with it. Please note, he is not dispensing with the text here and what he says conforms with Scripture, but he admits this Christological interpretation is an allegory, something to which reading the text leads him.*

*I am not sure how that would fly at the seminary. I wonder how a student there who found this passage in Luther and submitted it as a take on Jonah would fare. I know my hermeneutics prof. would have not approved.*

*This comes at the end of his words on Jonah. He has briefly surveyed a few ancient authorities and offered up rather quick and cursory treatment of the book chapter by chapter in a lecture format. It was intended to familiarize and acquaint his students with this book and some of the theological themes that come up. As such it fit within a long-standing tradition of medieval theological education. Most master's of theology were called upon to give these lectures on the Scripture. We often imagine that the medieval church had forgotten about the Bible and Luther rediscovered it. That is not true. Medieval theologians were immersed in Scripture and regularly lectured, wrote on, and discussed scripture. Their methods of interpretation were different, but they were very scriptural. Luther's great contribution was rather to see everything through the Law/Gospel lens of Justification by Faith. He applies that in his brief treatment of Jonah in 1525, recorded in volume 19 of "Luther's Works" in English.*

*What I find odd about Luther's treatment of Jonah is that he does not explore in the least Jonah's motive for his disobedience. He treats Jonah's flight here as disobedience and a sinful assertion of the human will over against God's will, but he never really explores the question of why and I find that question to fruitful, especially since the book of Jonah does explore that question. Jonah does not flee Nineveh because he is afraid of the Ninevites; although, Luther at points assumes this is so. He runs the other way because he hates them. God has called him to preach repentance to them and he refuses because he doesn't want them to repent. He wants them to continue sinning so God will rain down fire and death on their heads. He knows full well that God is merciful and will forgive the penitent sinner. Jonah does not want the Ninevites to repent. He wants them to die. He wants God's wrath to be poured out upon them. He hates Nineveh, you see.*

*For the preacher in the Epiphany season, God's treatment of Nineveh and his rescue of Jonah from his own hatred are just too good of an opportunity to pass up. Jesus is the light of the world, God's revelation of his love to all the sinners on this globe. That is a strong theme of this season which began with Kurdish wise men kneeling before the child Jesus and offering up their gifts. Last week we saw Jesus praise the centurion's faith and Naaman healed through the ministry of God's prophet Elisha.*

*The whole purpose of the story of Jonah seems to have been to smash the walls of hatred which the Israelites had erected in their misinterpretation of God's word. From the beginning God had said that Abraham and his descendants would be a blessing to all the earth. Isaiah, as we read in chapters 9, 11, 25, 42, etc. has repeatedly spoken of God gathering all the nations to Zion's hill, united under God's banner.*

*Perhaps most importantly, the Apostle Paul will jump on the Jonah bandwagon, rooting his radical re-reading of the Old Testament in that promise made to Abraham (see Galatians 3.) His struggle with his own prejudice against all things gentile was overcome when he carefully and prayerfully re-read his OT after his encounter with Jesus on a road to Damascus. He spent years doing it, and when he came preaching out of the desert of Arabia and from the personal exile in Tarsus, he pointed again and again to God's long-stated mission to save all the world, even the*

*Gentiles, through the seed of Abraham. Jesus fits that description and by his resurrection has demonstrated, at least for Paul, that he is the Messiah who has come to do that.*

*Which brings us back to Luther's allegory of Jonah in which the prophet becomes a physical prophecy of Christ who was swallowed up by the common human experience of death, that end for every human being, that reality which renders all of us into the past tense eventually. Jesus, thrown into the sea of humanity, swallowed up by the greatest fish of them all, the leviathan death, has burst that prison wide open for all of humanity.*

*Luther's allegory feels like an imposition on the text to a modern reader. But it isn't. It is a much more careful reading of the text, the whole text, than all the dithering about whether a man can survive such an experience or if Jonah is a parable/myth. The modern who finds the historical questions of that sort important has failed to really read the story. He chafes at the allegory, but his literalism has blinded him to what it really says.*

*The preacher may not want to dive into that allegory. That is fine. The story of Jonah, however, offers him so many opportunities to preach the heart of God which he has revealed in Christ through our Lord's death and resurrection. He may well want to preach this text.*

**Sermon Idea:** Rescued (That the Holy Spirit would crush the hearers' spiritual pride and replace it with the wholesome faith and humble trust in God which listens and loves as God would will.)

There are several ways you can run with the rescued theme:

1. Jonah is rescued from the storm
2. The sailors are rescued from God's wrathful pursuit of Jonah when he stops sailing away.
3. Jonah is rescued by the fish (sea monster!)
4. Jonah is eventually rescued from his bigotry and hatred of the Ninevites.
5. The Ninevites and even their cattle are rescued from the wrath of God.

The only one who doesn't get rescued is the vine that God has planted to shade grumpy Jonah.

The story of Jonah is one of those times when we are hooked by the Bible. We read a story which seems to be about other people and suddenly we discover this is about us, and it is not saying good things about me. God likes to do this. The most obvious example is the prophet Nathan hooking adulterous David with the little parable of the rich and poor man and the poor man's lamb that the rich man stole. David's indignation at the behavior of the rich man become his own self-condemnation when Nathan says, "You are the man!" The parable of the prodigal does the same thing. We suddenly find that we are the older brother who is lost by doing good, staying home, and thinking that such things are what really matter.

The preacher may want to look at the things we developed in the three year series regarding the Epistle reading. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians dealt with the theology of the Cross. Jonah is becoming a theologian of a cross. It was not a pleasant or a fun process for him, might not be for us either. Jonah doesn't pray until he is in the belly of the fish. Until that point, his only communication with God has been "No!" He was boasting in himself in a sense, he was the

subject of the verbs but God was in the process of changing that. He was playing the comparison game and it sure looked to him like the Ninevites were coming up short.

Jonah looks like a strange story of a man who crosses God, disobeys, and faces some dire, disgusting consequences as he spends three days in the belly of a fish and gets vomited up onto the land. Can you just imagine the smell? I have this picture of Jonah heaving and gasping for breath on the Mediterranean beach somewhere and the Word/Jesus bending down over him and with a glitter in his eye saying, “Jonah, are you ready to go to Nineveh now?”

But as the story progresses, we find that Jonah is much more than a fish story. It is a story that reveals the very heart of God for this world and calls us to beautiful lives of brilliant and dangerous service. Jonah was sure he knew who was inside and outside the kingdom of God. He was certain that Ninevites did not belong in the kingdom. He had lots of reasons. They were oppressing his people. Their armies came storming into the fertile farms of Galilee and carried off the wealth and slaves. They burned, and raped, and pillaged. It was hard to love a Ninevite.

When God called Jonah to preach repentance to them, Jonah knew that God was a forgiving God and he said, “No.” Bad Jonah, we think, but before we get too comfortable in our shelters and in the cool shade of our vines, we need to hear what God has said to us. God has planted this congregation in this town, in this city, in this place, because God loves the whole of this community. He has not called us to serve only the folks like us, or who agree with us. There is no right political party in God’s kingdom, there are only sinners for whom Jesus has died.

In a day of divisive political rhetoric, it is easy to see “them” as people with whom we just won’t speak, won’t deal, and won’t serve. But Christ’s own example just won’t let us have it. He ate with the lepers and the prostitutes, with terrorists (zealots) and collaborators (tax collectors).

Jonah refused to love those Ninevites. He jumped on a ship heading the other way and thereby became a lesson to us all. God will not have his gracious will thwarted by our pettiness. A storm, the certain death of being cast overboard in the midst of that storm, an unlikely rescue by being consumed by the very sort of beast Jonah feared, and God was ready to send his prophet again. We can turn from loving those whom God would have us love. But there is a storm and very large fish waiting for those who do so. What is more, having been crushed by God’s love for them, we find that our very existence is due only to that same love God has for us.

Jonah prayed in that fish. He thought, meditated, and repented. You see, this is the real story of Jonah, the fish, and the city of Nineveh. Yes, God loved those terrible Ninevites. He would forgive and spare them as you probably already know. But God loved his foolish, petty, and stubborn prophet as well. Jonah announced God’s judgment and set himself up outside the city to watch God destroy it. But against all expectation and despite his hope, the message of God’s wrath and judgment cut the Ninevites to the quick. They repented. God forgave, and Jonah fumed. But God called his foolish prophet and us his foolish people back to his heart.

God does this today as well. There is no one beneath the love which God has given us in Jesus. You were not, nor is anyone out there beneath it. No one is too wicked, too immoral, too broken, too foul, too liberal, or too conservative for God to love.

If there is to be any sort of healing in this climate of division and partisan rancor, perhaps it is going to start with Christian people who stop asking “who did you vote for?” and who start notice “whom did he die for?”

[Some fun connections with the Gospel are possible here. Jesus will order the fish into the disciples’ nets and sends Peter to catch a fish and find a coin to pay the tax, he sent this fish to swallow Jonah.](#)

### Psalm 96

- <sup>1</sup> Oh sing to the LORD a new song;  
sing to the LORD, all the earth!
  - <sup>2</sup> Sing to the LORD, bless his name;  
tell of his salvation from day to day.
  - <sup>3</sup> Declare his glory among the nations,  
his marvelous works among all the peoples!
  - <sup>4</sup> For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;  
he is to be feared above all gods.
  - <sup>5</sup> For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,  
but the LORD made the heavens.
  - <sup>6</sup> Splendor and majesty are before him;  
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
  - <sup>7</sup> Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,  
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!
  - <sup>8</sup> Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;  
bring an offering, and come into his courts!
  - <sup>9</sup> Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness;  
tremble before him, all the earth!
  - <sup>10</sup> Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns!  
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;  
he will judge the peoples with equity.”
  - <sup>11</sup> Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;  
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
  - <sup>12</sup> let the field exult, and everything in it!
- Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
- <sup>13</sup> before the LORD, for he comes,  
for he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness,  
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Romans 8:18-23

<sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. <sup>23</sup> And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> *For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?* <sup>25</sup> *But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

<sup>26</sup> *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.* <sup>27</sup> *And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.* <sup>28</sup> *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* <sup>29</sup> *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.* <sup>30</sup> *And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

*I have extended the reading a little further to provide some important context. This reading appears in the three year lectionary, series A, in proper 11 which falls in the second half of July. We treated it last summer and am including those notes here.*

*I believe this might be one of the texts most suited to this current age. When our prophet of the age is a former vice president who proclaims an environmental apocalypse, we are probably in a generation of folks who are asking a different set of questions than they were when Luther was on the scene, or my own father for that matter. (I saw in the paper just today that Al Gore's sequel to his "Inconvenient Truth" documentary was just released to a standing ovation at the Sundance film festival.)*

*The preacher today has a chance to say that the salvation which Christ won on the cross is for the whole creation, as it groans. That image of a groaning creation seems ripe with potential for an audience of folks who are concerned about the environment.*

*Now, it must be said at the same time, that my own experience in Lutheran congregations suggests that we Lutherans often make our living from agricultural and extractive industries. That means many of us are farmers, miners, lumbermen, or other folk whose livelihood is*



*threatened by the very environmentalism which Al Gore and the Sierra Club espouse. The preacher thus has two opportunities to preach the Gospel here but might need to exercise a little care in how to do it. Truthfully, the preacher who preached too extreme of a position in my former parish would have done great harm and surely closed the ears of many of his hearers to his message. They were largely folks who made their livelihood in the timber industry. Spotted owl was a dirty word for them. At the same time I lived in one of the most beautiful parts of the world and had some ardent environmentalists in my congregation. If I took the position of industry in this, I was also going to do harm and close ears.*

*So what shall we say? I believe there to be a message of Law and Gospel for both audiences here. Surely we all can lament the trash beside the road, the toxins in the water supply, the degradation of the salmon runs, the loss of species to extinction and the like. The creation does groan, and that groaning is brought on by sin. Whether global warming is a direct result of my gas guzzling ways or if it is indeed a natural cycle, I really don't know and ultimately doesn't make a difference for what I preach. I do know that in much of what I see and hear about the world, I am watching the terrible effects of humanity's Fall into Sin. Is the world messed up because it is simply messed up, or did I make it that way? Who can really answer the question other than God? It seems that he suggests as much in Genesis 3 when he says that Adam will toil and labor against a nature which no longer is cooperative but which sprouts thistles and weeds.*

*The real joy of this text is that we can preach a message of God's reconciliation with the whole of creation. Jesus did not die on that cross to whisk our souls away to heaven for some sort of spiritual renewal, but he also died for the whole of his creation, a restoration which will take place when the sons of God are revealed on the last day. The passenger pigeon will fly again. There will no longer be a giant island of trash in the Pacific Ocean. These things are important to Jesus too, and the answer to these questions lies not with us as much as it does with God. He may use us, and I think we all can agree that responsible stewardship of the earth is a wise and God-pleasing thing, but we hope in Him, not in us.*

*If this is a strange or unusual read of the text, that is because American Lutheranism has drunk deeply of the Calvinist well. Calvin was a great admirer of St. Augustine, but he read Augustine rather narrowly, focusing on Augustine's "use" of the created world to "enjoy" only God. The result of this is a tendency inside Calvinism and its daughter traditions (Armenianism, Holiness, Pentecostalism, etc.) to see the creation as something which is not part of the plan of salvation. This is why they struggle to see baptismal water as a means of grace. God would never use water, mere creation, to save us because salvation is essentially an escape from creation. In this view, the created world is so corrupt that it must be destroyed utterly and remade. Our bodies, our sinful flesh, the whole world are the problem.*

*Luther and the Lutheran movement, however, has a much more positive view of the created world. Luther loved his beer and sausage, he was happily married, he could wish for the intensity of faith which he saw in his dog who watched him eat the sausage. When Zwingli wanted to suggest that the body of Jesus was limited to heaven at the Ascension, Luther called*

*him an ignorant pig and countered that Jesus had entered the cosmos, united himself with the whole of creation. He saw in the symbolic understanding of the sacraments a very problematic Christology and anthropology which was not congruent with what he read in his Bible or experienced in God.*

*Thus Lutherans, when they are true to their confession and Lutheran-ness, have a strong theology of the creation, which often finds its expression sacramentally in Eucharist, Baptism, and the Church. These physical, created things are moments in which God restores creation and unites not only our souls but also our bodies to himself in the incarnate Christ. But our theology of creation is not only found in the sacramental actions and elements, but it permeates the whole of our theology, including our stewardship, evangelism, doctrine of vocation, and much more.*

*I would like once more to point out the recurrent Biblical image for the end of the world which Paul uses again here. It is like childbirth. It is dangerous, it is painful, but it is a time of hope and joy as well. The life which awaits us on the other side of the “labor” is a very good thing. To speak of the last day as the “end of the world” is to miss the large and faithful point. As Paul says the current sorrows are not worth comparing to the joys which await us in glory. This too is a really effective image for the hearer.*

*The last section is also really important for it establishes our humility before God. We don’t have all the right prayers, but the Spirit does, and groans for us and through us. Even in our best moments, when we do remember to pray, we are always inadequate of ourselves. But God knows this and gives us his very self so our prayers are full and complete and they are heard and answered. This too is another worthy sermon on this text.*

Or

Romans 13:8-10

<sup>8</sup> Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup> For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>10</sup> Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Matthew 8:23-27

<sup>23</sup> And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. <sup>24</sup> And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. <sup>25</sup> And they went and woke him, saying, “Save us, Lord; we are perishing.” <sup>26</sup> And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. <sup>27</sup> And the men marveled, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?”

## Luther

1. Today's Gospel presents an episode from which we learn not what things we are to do – for there is no mention of deeds – but rather, what one ought to believe in time of need and tribulation, and how we may be comforted. It is, therefore, a lesson on faith, the cardinal article of Christianity. We all like to think of this as a simple thing, within each person's capacity; but no one except a genuine Christian and truly sanctified person really understands it.

3. The first section is about the cross, for Christ, and then for his disciples. When the Lord stepped into the ship with his disciples all was quiet; there was no storm. Instead the sun was shining and the sea was calm and friendly. But soon after they had shoved off from land and were on the sea, the sky became dark and a great storm arose, so that the little ship was swamped with waves and seemed ready to sink.

4. Let us note this incident well, for it seems that as soon as the teaching about faith is in the picture and Christ steps into the ship, then, as the saying goes, It won't be long before there's threatening weather; the sun won't shine any longer and the sea will rage and storm...It is a story oft repeated in the Gospel accounts. Where before all is quiet, as soon as Christ permits himself to be heard with his preaching and to be seen with his miracles, there pandemonium breaks out on every hand, as the devil angrily stirs up and agitates the rogues – the Pharisees, the scribes, and the high priests – who want him dead.

5. This is how it all works together, if you want to be a Christian and follow this Lord, and step with him into the ship, resigning your heart to him and composing your soul in patience. For as soon as you commit yourself to this Lord and come with him into the ship, wind, storm, and buffeting will surely ensue...In other words, if you don't want to be God's servant, just coast along, the devil will leave you alone. On the other hand, if you desire to serve God and be a Christian, resign yourself willingly and say goodbye to good days, for you will not escape persecution. But don't despair! Even though the waves beat over the ship, and the sea becomes wild and turbulent, do not be afraid because of that, but think rather: I didn't get into this to gain the world's favor; and I'm not going to give it up because of its rancor and raging. That's what the Evangelist wishes to teach us, namely that the storm first started after Christ stepped into the ship and launched into the sea, as though the conclusion was: If you want to be a Christian, then you must expect that the wind, the sea, and storms will make mischief. To you wish to preach Christ and acknowledge the faith? Then expect the world to turn ugly.

7. This, however, is not the fault of the Lord Jesus, but of the devil who is his enemy and cannot abide him. For he also hates the gospel, and because of it wanted to instigate as much unrest and misery as possible, in order to smash it. But blind and stubborn folks don't perceive this. They see only the trouble and the distress, and wrongfully blame it on the gospel. But it is

blessing that comes from the gospel, for by the gospel one come sot know God, comes to forgiveness of sins, and gains eternal salvation, which they refuse to see.

13. The second lesson concerns the right form of faith, its rightful work and readiness for action. The word “faith” seems like an insignificant thing to our ears, just as our adversaries, the papists, laugh and ridicule us when they hear us preach about faith. Oh, they say, what is faith? They, on the contrary, make much of free will. I might wish that they had been in the boat with the disciples and experienced free will’s capacity in time of extremity and need.

14. The disciples had an excellent object lesson here of how free will does not stand up very well. Even though their faith was weak and small, nevertheless, if there had not been this weak, small faith, but only free will, they would have sunk into the depths of the sea. But because there was a flicker of faith present, as Christ himself witnessed when he said, “O ye of little faith,” they had recourse, so that they did not despair; they ran to Christ, awoke him, and begged for help.

15. If now those with faith, however weak and frail, could not survive in time of need – as the apostles found out under duress when the chips were down – how could free will and human wisdom prevail? I grant that you have a free will to milk the cow and to build a house, but that’s it. When you live in security, exercise your freedom, are free of danger, and have no needs, then you may think that with free will you can do anything. But in time of need, when there is nothing to eat or drink and you are without provisions or money, where is your free will then? It’s lost, and fails you when it comes to the test. But faith stands and seeks Christ...Free will is a powerless thing, faith a mighty thing. We see this very clearly in the disciples’ case when they were in danger. They found rescue and happiness; and all was well. As the saying goes: “Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.”...The disciples in the ship had a weak faith; nevertheless, they sought help where it was to be found, namely, with the Lord Jesus; they awoke him and cried, “Lord, save us, we perish.”

18. Therefore, it is God’s great mercy if even with a weak faith we do not despair of God’s help as do the vast majority. Free will sees only the present moment, faith looks beyond the transient. Faith is a replay of all comfort, salvation, and joy. It may see death’s fangs and hell’s jaws; nevertheless it calls to mind and clings confidently to the hope of being helped, just as the disciples clung to the Lord for help and comfort. In the same breath is cries both, ““We perish!” and also “Lord, help!” But the “Lord, help!” finally wins and brings the victory.

19. That is the characteristic of faith, which everyone assumes he understands very well. But the person who truly understands it and has experienced it, knows how in time of need the world is pretty narrow. On the other hand, those that pride themselves on having a strong faith are likely to be bold, impudent, proud souls as long as the sea is calm and the weather good;

but when disaster strikes and all is amiss, then courage and comfort forsake them and they are ready to despair. So much for “glorious” free will then!

20. The third lesson treats the person of the Lord Christ. It tells us of Christ’s sleeping on the boat. His was a real, natural, deep sleep, for the Lord had spent the day working and preaching, and at night had prayed and watched, becoming very weary; as a result he at times slept during the day while others were awake.

21. We must not assume that Christ had only halcyon days here on earth. Were the record complete, we would read of many temptations he suffered from the devil, as he laments in Psalm 88:15-16: “I am afflicted and ready to die from my youth up; while I suffer thy terrors I am distracted. Thy fierce wrath goeth over me; thy terrors have cut me off.” For that reason he was never carefree. Burdened heavily, his mind was deep in thought. He was filled with misery and sadness, watching many nights without sleep, seldom laughing, as verse 4 of Psalm 88 indicates: “I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am as a man that hath no strength.”

22. This is still so today as the Lord deals with his Christians. It seems that he doesn’t see them, knows nothing of their trials, is indifferent about the, yes, as though they were not his worry – like herein the ship. He lies there sleeping and pays no attention to the weather, his disciples, or the ship. But he is with the ship even though he sleeps. Even though we think that Christ does not hear or see the thunderstorm, the wind, and the sea, he hears and sees it nonetheless. Therefore, we should make this a maxim: Even though he sleeps, Christ is in the boat.

23... We experienced some of this at the imperial diet in Augsburg when the emperor, the pope, the bishops, and the princes opposed us. Then our state of mind was no different than that of the disciples in the ship. Our minds respond, Where now? Who are we against such mighty rulers and princes? For human reason, with its free will, cannot think otherwise...

24. At such a time we must remind ourselves that there is no dire crisis, for the Lord is with us in the ship. Even though he sleeps and acts as though he does not see us, nevertheless, we should proceed as though we see him, and believe with all our hearts that he is Lord over the emperor, Turk, pope, devil, pestilence, and all misfortune, come what may.

25. So it is also in our own life’s journey where trials affect each one individually in some personal way. For every Christian finds out for himself that the devil buffets him, just as the waves beat against the ship. When such temptations come and the devil reproaches you with your sin, frightens you with God’s anger, and threatens you with eternal damnation, do not despair, but firmly believe that Christ is with you in the ship and, even though he sleeps, will certainly hear and rescue you when you petition and implore him.

30. The fourth lesson is about the fruits which result from faith, that is, others become aware of these miracles, are converted, and say, “What manner of man is this that even the wind and the

sea obey him?” Likely until now they had considered him a poor carpenter’s apprentice, Joseph’s son, and an ordinary man, and did not know or believe that with him one could seek for and find help when in peril of life. Now, however, they learn to know him as the biggest and greatest helper at times when human help could not avail.

31. As always, the greater the trial, the greater the antidote. That is why affliction is very necessary and useful for the Christian...

32. This, then, is a most wonderful lesson for those who earnestly desire to be Christians. From it we should learn that when storms rage, Christ will not only be there ready to help us, but great blessing and glorious fruit will also result.

*(Luther’s House Postils Vol 1. Ed.: E. Klug. Baker, 1996. Pp. 253-263.)*

**Sermon Idea:** Faith (That the Holy Spirit would build and strengthen the faith of the hearer)

This sermon will consider that the hearer is really in a boat with the disciples today. If you have a traditionally shaped church, you will want to play with this. Most long churches have a steeply pitched roof. If you flipped it upside down, it would look a little like a boat. That is why this room in which we preach is usually called the “nave” which is a nautical term related to Navy. It was hard in my old parish, it had a shape that made it look more like a barge than a ship.

But even if your church is in the round, you can still do this. This image goes back a very long way. The early church theologians regularly depicted the church as a band of people who were sailing to a blessed port, with Jesus and the Holy Spirit at the tiller. This story figured prominently in their development of that image.

Our little ship feels like it is being buffeted by storms. What are they? The preacher will need to identify and name a few of them, but he may not want to spend too much time here. Let the imagination of the hearer fill in some blanks. That way it is more real for them.

Luther’s comments above are helpful.

1. The storms come to all who set sail with Jesus. This is not just happenstance or a natural thing. Our enemy raises the storms and sometimes God himself does as he did for Jonah. Those storms can come because we are getting this right and the devil hates that and wants to distract from God’s mission and course. Or we can be on a wrong course and God can be rocking this boat to force a course change. But storms they will come.
2. Jesus will be sleeping in the back of the boat. It will appear that God does not care. He will feel distant, inattentive, and insensitive to our fear and terror. That is normal. Don’t believe it, but it is normal. God is building faith and he does not build faith by never testing us. Boot camp is not about making new soldiers feel good about themselves. It is about pushing and pushing them, so they will know what they can do. God likewise exercises us, allows calamities and terrors to descend upon us.

3. The goal of all this is to get us to give up on ourselves and turn to him. Luther adroitly noticed a 16<sup>th</sup> century proclivity to trust in their own will/decision, as if that was the faith Jesus sought and through which God worked. But Luther suggests that real need simply smashes that idea. When you are in a sinking boat all the free will in the world doesn't really help. You need God. God is disabusing us of the silly notion that we have anything to do with our salvation. The disciples did not ask the carpenter to help them sail the boat when they got in. They were fishermen. It was their boat, they did not need a land-lubber's advice. But when it came to the moment of real crisis, when it looked like they might just sink, they turned to Jesus for help. Even their pitiable and weak faith knew where to go. They had no help but God and Jesus was the answer.
4. But God does help. The disciples end this lesson asking exactly the right question. Who is this man? You want your hearers to know the answer. He is nothing other than God's only son, the certain port in every storm, the one who can save from every foe, including death, cancer, failure, Alzheimer's, and poverty.

Luther does us a great favor today. He helps us see that faith is not something that we do. It is that God helps us; that is when faith is working. Faith is not making the right choice or saying the right prayers. Faith is the realization that I am really helpless and my only help lies with God. Like Luther's generation, there are many who locate faith in the will. That particular problem has not gone away. It is not the papists but the American Evangelicals who trumpet the value of the will. But as Luther says, when the boat is taking on water, the will won't save you, God will save you.