

Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, 22.i.2006
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Bregue Village-Chanceford Twp.-York Co.-Pennsylvania
10:00 a.m., Ante-Communion Liturgy, LBW 2
Jonah 3:1-5,10; Psalm 62:6-14; I Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

J. J.!

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and
Who is to come. ✠ Amen.

**“Brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown
short . . . For the present form of this world is
passing away.”**

– I Corinthians 7:29,31b

Perhaps we think that we have done quite enough overeating for
one Christmas and Epiphany season, but the Holy Spirit is
serving us a sweet cake of wisdom in God’s Word to us through
Sacred Scripture today—and in four big helpings!

As the Eastern Church is just beginning the season of the
Epiphany, we Christians of the West hear God’s call to prepare
ourselves for repentance and the great fast of Lent that will
begin in just five weeks. In all four Lessons from Sacred
Scripture today, the Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son calls
us to stop our routine, to examine our habits and the direction

of our lives, to focus on God and God's reign in our world through mercy, compassion, kindness and, above all, forgiveness.

In today's First Lesson, the story of Jonah, one of the earliest works of fiction on a religious theme, we hear the Holy Spirit's call to approach others with the love of God, without hesitation—something the already unwilling Prophet Jonah was especially unwilling to do. The Assyrians, mortal enemies of the Israelites and all other peoples of the Ancient Near East, were a people feared and hated by Jonah. Out of fear, Jonah took the first ship in the opposite direction of the enemy capital, Nineveh, in present-day Iraq. When that ploy failed, Jonah takes up his assignment to call the enemy king and his subjects to repentance and conversion—convinced that this will not work and that God will destroy them for their unbelief. To Jonah's surprise, and disgust, the Ninevites *do* repent and convert—even the animals among them! The story says that God changed His

mind about the Assyrians, even though Jonah still nurses his anger toward them and his bitterness toward God. Jonah assumed that the great enemy city would not repent in a thousand years, but the Assyrian king sees the urgency of the matter, hears the Prophet's Word as the Word of God and acts decisively, in an instant of faith.

The Psalmist calls us to what the first woman Doctor of the Church, Saint Theresa of Avila, would call centuries later that 'interior castle' of the silent contemplation of God: "For God alone, my soul in silence waits; truly, my hope is in Him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold, so that I shall not be shaken" (Ps. 62:6,7). Out of that silence, out of that peace, out of that intense listening to God in the midst of either persecution or indifference, the Father's sons and daughters by adoption can emerge full of joy and strength, ready to answer the call to discipleship either to the short path to martyrdom or over the long and twisting path of a so-called 'normal' life.

With the first Disciples in today's Gospel, we hear the Spirit's call to follow Christ *now*, not later, when we might suppose it more convenient. Why? Because God's love is *now*, not later, because, as Saint Paul confesses with such passion and such conviction, "the present form of this world is passing away."

According to Apostolic teaching, we are not to squander time as though it were in endless supply. It is not! "Brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short!" the Apostle almost seems to shout at the Corinthians, but also at us. The focus on each day and on each hour as a priceless and unrepeatable chance to live the Kingdom of God is to be the focus of our faith *no matter what else concerns us*. Paul lists these concerns or life situations, describing matters as real for us today as they were in the lives of Christians two millennia ago.

The Apostle begins with *being married*—enough to occupy most of the waking hours of most husbands and wives with its joys and worries, with its responsibilities and its blessings. Here

and elsewhere, Paul makes no secret of his opinion that marriage may not be the best platform for a life dedicated to a single goal. But—thanks be to God—the Apostle had to accept marriage as a given for most men and women.

Nevertheless, it is not to crowd out the life of the spirit for which we were created and to which we were reborn in Christ. Instead, Christ is to stand at the center of married life, “as they were not married,” Paul writes. In the ancient marriage rite of our brothers and sisters of the Armenian Apostolic Church, after reciting their vows of fidelity before God’s Altar, the couple kneels, facing each other, as the Bishop or Priest gently brings their foreheads together while a Deacon or marriage witness touches both their heads with the Holy Cross. To be married as though not married? Is this foolishness? No, because human love is based on a greater love, a deeper love and a wider love that encompasses the whole universe, and the time appointed for us to understand this has grown short, as it always

has been. And so, we who are married are called *both* to care for one another, to fulfill the sacred office of husband and wife *and also* to an interior place, a place in our lives, our hearts and our minds where we stand in awe of the Holy One. That, holy space of faith, as much as the roof and the table and the bed we share in marriage, is to be our address as married Christians now, in the midst of life, God's home where we live by Christ's invitation, awaiting us also when we enter the state of widowhood or pass through the gate of Heaven ourselves.

The Apostle mentions not next, but also, 'buying and selling,' business, and 'dealing with the world,' which could, I suppose, include everything from dealing with the public to diplomacy, government, or what have you. Having spent some time last week watching my son making preparations to open the first business of his very own, a restaurant based on his own ideas and experience, I know how enervating and frightening that involvement in life can be. Yet, the Apostle reminds us

sternly, though we may be thus involved and nearly carried away with excitement in anticipation of realizing a dream, we are, at another level, to live as though none of this business were happening. Why? Even if the world did not end as soon as many scholars think Paul thought it would, our partnership with God in Creation is limited by our own creaturehood, by the limits of the world itself. *God* is that limit. *Christ*, the Crucified and Risen One, reveals to us a world beyond that limit. To forget the Creator of the world in the midst of the world's business is to close ourselves to the invitation of the Redeemer of the world.

When life is going our way, when our projects succeed and even turn a profit, we may rejoice in such a way that forgets God as the limit of all things, forgetting how quickly laughter can turn to tears, confusing earthly happiness with beatitude. When reverses come, when what seemed like luck turns to what we call misfortune, and especially when the gift of life in those

we love returns to the Giver, then, in mourning, it is also possible to close ourselves to any reality but our own pain.

Those who mourn experience an emptiness others may understand but cannot feel until loss of life becomes their own loss. Mourning can become more than a keeping faith with the departed and their memory. Mourning can also become a covenant with that very emptiness left by the one who has returned to God, a life based on that emptiness so that the void becomes greater, crowding out others and even life itself. To the mourners Paul says they are to live “as though they were not mourning.” Why? Because God in Christ Jesus is also the limit of the void, the border God’s love places around a world left empty because it no longer contains the one who has been torn from our heart. He Who has passed through the gate of death and hell and has risen to the glory of the Father will not permit the void of grief to grow beyond the limit God’s love with which the departed one is now clothed forever.

Over a decade and a half ago, the first cake I was served as a pastor newly arrived in Germany was a butter and sugar cake called *Freud und Leid*, 'joy and sorrow,' because it is served at both weddings and funerals. It was a lovely welcome to a full ministry that would include many weddings and even more funerals, much sorrow but also much joy. On this Third Sunday after the Epiphany, we have been nourished with the rich, sweet Word of God that calls us to something better, even when we think we have tasted the best, and to something good, strengthening, wholesome and even good-tasting, just when we think we might have given up on food and the rest of the fare life seems to serve up. Here it is, placed before you, the prophetic call to share God's love those very ones on whom we might have regarded as our enemies, the call to contemplate in silence the mystery of the Triune God, the call to *focus* our lives out of the joy and sorrow of this life on our life with God which is everlasting, the call to rise and to follow Christ Our Lord and

God into the future which belongs to Him alone! What a feast, and what nourishment for the journey of faith is ours! ✠ Amen.



This will be my last Sunday with you until Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday before the great fast and pilgrimage of Lent. I have chosen, with our Council's permission, understanding and generous blessing, to use all four weeks of my vacation for this calendar year in the form of a self-guided spiritual retreat beginning on the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany. During this time, I propose to use the Means of Grace, manual labor and vigorous physical recreation, the gifts of the interior life and, if possible, opportunities for pilgrimage to sites of spiritual significance within reasonable distance, all with the intention of seeking God's blessing of healing and strength in my own life and for our life together as pastor and congregation.

You will be in my prayers daily, as I allow memory to be aided by our parish register in offering intercession for each

household and member. I ask your prayers for me daily, not only during the days of my retreat but also and especially during this week, as I attempt to conclude Church business here and make preparation for the days ahead. For the other members of my family both here and in other states, I ask your prayers as we pass together through a difficult anniversary, ever mindful that our future is in God's eternity and plan.

During my absence, leadership of Divine Worship and care of the Word of God will be placed in the capable hands of the Rev. Seminarian Christina Minnich, Candidate for the Sacred Ministry of Word and Sacrament. On the first Sunday in February, the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Candidate Minnich will administer the elements of the Lord's Supper, presanctified for use in this Congregation at the Eucharist of the Baptism of Our Lord and retained in Vessels with which the Church has been endowed for this purpose in memory of my daughter, Katherine.

Pastoral care of the Congregation in case of death or spiritual crisis will be provided by the Rev. Dione Klepetka, Pastor of Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Shrewsbury, and, where necessary, other rostered clergy of our Lutheran Synod and Conference designated by her alone. Under no circumstances is the burden of the care of this Congregation to be placed on the shoulders of our dear brother and friend, the Rev. Joseph Seitz, on whom the responsibilities of marriage and family already weigh heavily enough because of the ill health and infirmity of those who depend so completely on him. Let us keep Pastors Joe and Bonnie Seitz and their extended family constantly in our prayers.

To our Congregation Council and to the Committees and workers involved directly in the renovation of the Altar and Reredos, I say Godspeed and much joy in your labor! May it all be so that the immortal Word of salvation may be served and glorified to the peace, the healing, the salvation of all who

worship in this Holy House. As God's Altar is brought nearer the midst of God's people, let us look forward with confident hope and joy to our reunion on the feast of Our Lord's Transfiguration when we will see His glory with the eyes of faith!



Now to Him Who loves us and has saved us by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

S. D. G.!

