

CONFIRMATION SERMON- April 14, 2019

“A Modern Day Jonah Story”

750 years before the birth of Jesus God called Jonah of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to travel to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, to proclaim His word against their evil. Jonah instead went the opposite direction on a boat to get as far away from God as he could. God sent a storm after Jonah who fessed up to running away from God. At his own advice, Jonah was thrown overboard. The sea calmed and Jonah was swallowed by a large fish. From there Jonah prayed in repentance, “But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord.”

God gave Jonah a second chance at answering His prophetic call. Jonah went to Nineveh and preached, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown!” The people believed and responded, from king to servant fasting and sitting in sackcloth and ashes. God saw their repentance and relented of the disaster He had threatened. But this is not the end of the story. God now has to deal with Jonah who wanted to see some punishment. “I knew that You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster. Just put me to death.” While Jonah waited for the city to be destroyed, God provided a plant to give Jonah shade but then also sent a worm to eat and kill the plant. Jonah was mad about that even though he had done nothing to make it grow. God pointed out to Jonah that Nineveh was full of people He created, shouldn’t He have had pity on them? That is how story of Jonah ends, on a question that expects a “yes” answer.

That is quick two-minute summary of the story of the Old Testament minor prophet Jonah. Here is a modern day version of it. On August 20, 2018 God called Pastor Nebel to go into the 8th grade classroom and teach religion to junior-high students. He responded, “Lord, I have seen them grow from cute little kids to what they are now, teenagers! I have witnessed what they are capable of doing. I know that they will critique my choice of tie and shirt. They constantly will want to go to the bathroom. They won’t laugh at my jokes. And they will compare my size to that of barnyard animals.” So Pastor Nebel went in the opposite direction, to the parsonage for a nap on the couch. But God sent a thunderstorm that frightened Cooper the Wonder Dog so much that he swallowed Pastor Nebel whole. From the belly of that big beast of a beagle, Pastor Nebel repented of his disobedience. God then gave him a second chance at teaching these adolescents.

Pastor Nebel went into the 8th grade classroom and proclaimed, “Forty more days and the 8th grade will be destroyed!” From the largest of them to the smallest they repented, not in sackcloth and ashes, but by wearing free Thrivent t-shirts and torn

blue jeans. They said, “We will listen in class. We will study for our memory quizzes. We will be quiet when you are talking. We will turn our assignments in on time and with parent signatures.” So God relented and did not bring upon the 8th grade the disaster He had threatened. Pastor Nebel, however, returned to his office and looked out the window waiting for the fire and brimstone to fall upon the 8th grade classroom. God provided him a flourishing spider plant to shade him from the hot morning sun. But then God sent a worm to eat the plant. It withered and died. Pastor Nebel complained over his lost shade. God said, “Pastor Nebel, you were concerned about that plant which you did not create. Shouldn’t I also be concerned about those 8th graders for they are my children?”

You are thinking to yourself, this story sounds like fantasy. Those things certainly did not happen. You are right. Torn jeans are against school dress code policy and they never did study for their memory quizzes. Yeah, I made up those things. But what is true of the people of Nineveh then and what is also true of these young people before us today is that they are beloved creatures of God. They are God’s chosen children in Christ Jesus, His Son, their Lord and Savior. He wants to spare them.

Even more than your earthly parents, your baptismal sponsors, and your extended family who are here today with their love and concern for you, your heavenly Father loves you, cares for you and wants you to be His own. In your holy baptism, the Father claimed you as His own, the Son united you to Himself in His death for the forgiveness of your sins and in His resurrection for your new and eternal life with Him, and the Holy Spirit made your bodies His own earthly temples. The name “Christian” was placed upon you. Today, you are saying to family, friends, congregation, and world that you want to live w/ it.

That living will be so important for you in the years to come. You will face many opportunities either to compromise your faith and give in to temptation or confess your faith and stand up for your Savior Jesus. We pray for the confession of faith to be your choice at times of temptation. We encourage you to come to your Lord in repentance and receive His forgiveness when temptations get the better of you. Our Triune God is always ready and willing to welcome you back into His loving arms.

About that fire and brimstone, I have given up on it, it’s not going to happen. But then again, there are still six weeks left in the school year. Who knows what might happen? Maybe on the Washington DC trip you will be detained by the Secret Service for disorderly conduct during your White House tour. Or even worse, President Trump might make you members of his cabinet. AMEN (*stand*) Prayers