

**The Festival of Ash Wednesday (Observed)**  
26 February 2012  
*Concordia Lutheran Mission*  
Terrebonne, Oregon

## **“The Gospel Converted the Metropolis of Nineveh in One Sermon.”**

“And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil,  
that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did *it* not...”

**Jonah 3:10**

### **Introduction**

Does the Gospel work? Yes, indeed, the Gospel does work. For through the preaching of one sermon by Jonah the prophet, the Gospel converted the entire metropolis of Nineveh.<sup>1</sup>

Why, then, doesn't it always work when we see it so powerfully work in Nineveh? The answer to that lies in the darkness of the blackness of the hearts of men. And that answer leaves us even more in the dark than before we asked the question. For who can fathom or understand unbelief?<sup>2</sup>

But for those who believe, the Gospel is indeed what Scripture says: it is the Power of God unto salvation, delivering us from the darkness of sins into the light of eternal life with God.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>“In view of this, I am tempted to say that no apostle or prophet, not even Christ Himself, performed and accomplished with a single sermon the great things Jonah did. His conversion of the city of Nineveh with one sermon is surely as great a miracle as his rescue from the belly of the whale, if not an even greater one.” Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 19, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>“And he marvelled because of their unbelief.” **St. Mark 6:6.**

<sup>3</sup>“The plenitude of our possession of God's Word might be called an ocean over against the little drop which they had. For they could not have heard more of God's Word than the news that He is the Creator of heaven and earth, that He is the true God, that is, that He is gracious and merciful. This little fragment of information they use to such good advantage for their salvation that they put both Jews and Christians to shame.” Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 19, p. 89. This “little fragment” is the Saving Knowledge of God that gives life eternal because it restores in man the Image of God, which man lost by his sin. “And this is life eternal that they might

## I. The Gospel's Power is Demonstrated in the Conversion of the Metropolis of Nineveh through the Single Sermon of Jonah.

### A. Lent is a season of repentance.

Today is the Festival of Ash Wednesday (Observed). Ash Wednesday is the beginning of the penitential season of Lent and it reminds us of God's call to repentance, just as God called the metropolis of Nineveh to repentance:

And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. So the people of Nineveh believed God<sup>4</sup>, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered *him* with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.<sup>5</sup>

Ashes, we see, is a symbol used for repentance, reflecting the fact that we are ashes and dust because of our sins. This truth goes back to the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. Moses writes:

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed *is* the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat *of* it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.<sup>6</sup>

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know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.” **St. John 17:3.** “**113. What was the image of God?** The image of God consisted in this – A. That man *knew God* and was *perfectly happy* in such knowledge. ... [Ye] have put on the new man, which is renewed in *knowledge* after the *image of Him that created him*. *Col. 3:10*. ... B. That man was *perfectly holy* and blessed. ... Put on the new man, which *after God* is created in *righteousness and true holiness*. *Eph. 4:24*.” *The Small Catechism*, pp. 96, 97.

<sup>4</sup>The Hebrew text reads, “believed *in* God”, i.e. through faith they feared, loved, and trusted in God above all things. “**THE FIRST COMMANDMENT.** Thou shalt have no other gods before Me. *What does this mean?* We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” *The Small Catechism*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>**Jonah 3:4-6.**

<sup>6</sup>**Genesis 3:17-19.**

Likewise, Abraham says:

Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which *am but* dust and ashes....<sup>7</sup>

Dust and ashes powerfully reminds us of the reversal of the process of creation caused by sin and calls us away from sin to the light and life of the Gospel. The Rev. James L. Brauer writes in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*:

The ancient act [of the imposition of ashes] is a gesture of repentance and a powerful reminder about the meaning of the day. Ashes can symbolize dust-to-dustness<sup>8</sup> ....<sup>9</sup>

### **B. The Power of the Gospel is reflected in the conversion of Nineveh.**

But what could be so powerful that it could reverse the disintegration of man to dust because of his sin? The Gospel can reverse this devastating result because the Gospel is the Power of God unto salvation. St. Paul the Apostle writes:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>**Genesis 18:27.**

<sup>8</sup>“And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which *am but* dust and ashes....” **Genesis 18:27.** “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.” **Genesis 3:19.** Hence, we read in **The Order for the Burial of the Dead**, “FORASMUCH as it hath pleased Almighty God, in His wise providence, to take out of this world the soul of our departed *brother*, we therefore commit his body to the ground (to God’s acre); earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in the hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself.” *The Lutheran Agenda*, p. 95, underscore added.

<sup>9</sup>The Rev. James L. Brauer, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, editor, the Rev. Dr. Fred L. Precht, Authorized by The Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, p. 166.

<sup>10</sup>**Romans 1:16-17.**

The Power of the Gospel to create saving faith in the hearts of men and to resurrect them from the death of sin<sup>11</sup> is manifested powerfully in today's Old Testament reading in the conversion of the metropolis of Nineveh. Through the preaching of a single sermon, the entire metropolis of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, was converted. In Jonah we read:

And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered *him* with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.<sup>12</sup>

Luther writes of the conversion of Nineveh:

In view of this, I am tempted to say that no apostle or prophet, not even Christ Himself, performed and accomplished with a single sermon the great things Jonah did. His conversion of the city of Nineveh with one sermon is surely as great a miracle as his rescue from the belly of the whale, if not an even greater one.<sup>13</sup>

Here we also see that it is not the personality of the preacher that wins people to Christ<sup>14</sup>, but the All-Powerful Word of God, the Gospel. For Jonah was a reluctant, obstreperous, bilious, and recalcitrant preacher who resented the blessings God bestowed upon the people of Nineveh.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, because this reluctant and resentful preacher preached God's Word,

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<sup>11</sup>“And you *hath he* quickened, who were dead in trespass and sins....” **Ephesians 2:1.**

<sup>12</sup>**Jonah 3:4-6.**

<sup>13</sup>*Luther's Works*, Vol. 19, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup>“The Zwinglian and Calvinistic worship depends for its effect too much upon the intellectual and spiritual power of the minister, who can make it either very solemn and impressive, or very cold and barren.” The Rev. Dr. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume VIII, Modern Christianity, The Swiss Reformation*, third edition, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., reprinted March 1988, p. 61.

<sup>15</sup>“Surely, says Luther, a strange, peculiar kind of saint, to be angry because God is gracious to a Gentile city, grudgingly to deny her any share in God's love, to wish her only evil.” The Rev. Dr. Theodore Laetsch, *Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, p. 241. Nevertheless, Jonah, in the last analysis, repented of his ill-will and was pleased with the salvation of Nineveh. “Jonah would not have written so frank and self-humiliating a confession of his sin if he had not been sincerely repentant and had not hoped to preserve and save others from similar bigotry and grumbling. ‘By the very act of penning it [his confession], Jonah at once merges out of his

the Power of God unto salvation<sup>16</sup>, the people of Nineveh were saved.

### **C. The Gospel reconciles God to man.**

And even greater than the conversion of Nineveh is the Power of the Gospel to vanquish the wrath of God over the sins of the people of Nineveh and, indeed, the sins of all men. For the wrath of God over sin is as big as God Himself and goes on as long as God Himself, namely, forever. Because our offense, i.e. our sin, is as big as the One Whom we've offended, namely, the infinite and eternal God, for man to reconcile God to man required God Himself to become man to assume this burden and saving work. The Lutheran Church confesses:

*We Christians must know that if God is not also in the balance, and gives the weight, we sink to the bottom with our scale. by this I mean: If it were not to be said [if these things were not true], God has died for us, but only a man, we would be lost. But if 'God's death' and 'God died' lie in the scale of the balance, then He sinks down, and we rise up as a light, empty scale. but indeed He can also rise again or leap out of the scale; yet He could not sit in the scale unless He became a man like us, so that it could be said: 'God died,' 'God's passion,' 'God's blood,' 'God's death.' For in His nature God cannot die; but now that God and man are united in one person, it is correctly called God's death, when the man dies who is one thing or one person with God."<sup>17</sup>*

And this Great Work on the Cross Christ places in the Blessed Waters of Holy Baptism, the Gospel. St. Paul the Apostle writes:

... Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.<sup>18</sup>

Luther writes:

[H]oly baptism was purchased for us through this same blood, which was shed for

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former character and appears in our view not merely as a prophet, but as a remarkably humble and noble-spirited saint.' (Huxtable in *The Bible Commentary*, VI, 582)." The Rev. Dr. Theodore Laetsch, *Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, p. 243.

<sup>16</sup>**Romans 1:16.**

<sup>17</sup>*The Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article VIII. Of the Person of Christ.*<sup>44</sup>, underscore added.

<sup>18</sup>**Ephesians 5:25, 26-27.**

us and with which he paid for sin. This blood and its merit and power he put into baptism, in order that in baptism we might receive it. For whenever a person receives baptism in faith this is the same as if he were visibly washed and cleansed with the blood of Christ. For we do not attain the forgiveness of sins through our work, but rather through the death and the shedding of the blood of the Son of God. *But he takes this forgiveness of sin and tucks it into baptism.*<sup>19</sup>

Because the Gospel vanquishes the wrath of God, it reconciles God to man and, thereby, saves.

## **II. The Gospel Converts Men and Gives to them Life Eternal and the Resurrection of the Body.**

### **A. The Gospel is the Power of God unto salvation.**

Well, then, why does not everyone believe with this Great Power, the Almighty, working through the Gospel? The answer lies not in any deficiency in God's Power or Will to convert and save men, but rather in the darkness of man's unbelief. When Christ performed miracles in His own home town to prove once again that He is the Messiah, the people rejected Him. St. Matthew the Apostle writes:

And he went out from thence, and came into his own country; and his disciples follow him. And when the sabbath day was come, he began to teach in the synagogue: and many hearing *him* were astonished, saying, From whence hath this *man* these things? and what wisdom *is* this which is given unto him, that even such mighty works are wrought by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? and are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at him.<sup>20</sup> But Jesus said

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<sup>19</sup>*Luther's Works*, Vol. 51, p. 325.

<sup>20</sup>Here we see again the ruse of the flesh in its unbelief to change the subject by focusing on the common component to order to obscure the distinctive component of something, in this case, the flesh Christ holds in common with us is used to obscure the fact that this human flesh has miraculously and thankfully been assumed into the Person of the Son of God for our salvation. This same wicked ruse the flesh in its unbelief applies to God's saving Gospel. The Lutheran Church confesses: "But these people, the fanatics, are so blinded that they do not see the Word and command of God, and regard Baptism and the magistrates only as they regard water in the brook or in pots, or as any other man; and because they do not see faith nor obedience, they conclude that they are to be regarded as invalid. Here lurks a concealed seditious devil, who would like to tear the crown from the head of authority and then trample it under foot, and in addition, pervert and bring to naught all the works and ordinances of God. Therefore we must be watchful and well armed, and not allow ourselves to be directed nor turned

unto them, A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house. And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed *them*. And he marvelled because of their unbelief.<sup>21</sup>

If even the Omniscient Lord marvels at the unbelief of men, how much more so can we plumb the depths of the darkness of man that lies outside of the will of God? The Rev. Dr. George Stoeckhardt writes:

The evangelists Matthew and Mark also expressly remark that Jesus did not perform many miracles in Nazareth, nor could he, because of their unbelief, which amazed Him because unbelief ties the hands of our Lord, so that He cannot bless and benefit as much as He desires. Only a few invalids, who longed for His help, and received it gratefully, were healed with His hands being placed on them, the Lord finding a few grateful souls in all places. Matt. 13, 58; Mark 6, 6. Besides also in Capernaum and other places, Jesus helped only those in need, who believed and begged for His help.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, Luther comments on the power of unbelief in our own day:

It is ... still more remarkable that they [the people of Nineveh] do not despair in their fear and fright, though they have no promise of mercy. My dear man, what mainstay do they have to hold despair of? We have so many prophets, so many apostles, so many writings, so many books, pastors, and comforting words, and yet we do not trust in God aright. The plenitude of our possession of God's Word might be called an ocean over against the little drop which they had. For they could not have heard more of God's Word than the news that He is the Creator of heaven and earth, that He is the true God, that is, that He is gracious and merciful.<sup>23</sup> This little fragment of information they use to such good

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away from the Word, in order that we may not regard Baptism as a mere empty sign, as the fanatics dream." *The Large Catechism, Part Fourth. Of Baptism. Of Infant Baptism.* 60-63, *Triglotta*, pp. 747, 749.

<sup>21</sup>**St. Mark 6:1-6** (underscoring added).

<sup>22</sup>*Wisdom for Today*, Volumes II & III, tr. the Rev. Arthur E. Beck, Ft. Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, pp. 82.

<sup>23</sup>Here Luther articulates again the Saving Knowledge of God. "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." **St. John 17:3**. "Concerning this knowledge and its power the prophets have spoken gloriously and clearly prophesied, as in Isaiah 53 [:11]: 'By knowledge of Him shall He (My Servant, the Righteous One) make many just or righteous.' This means: 'He will redeem them from sins and

advantage for their salvation that they put both Jews and Christians to shame. These do not utilize their superfluity of God's Word half as well. For that reason Christ cites their example for the Jews and all of us in Matt. 12:41, saying: "The men of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here." And that remonstrance is very fair, for we do not show one half the zeal, though we are admonished with so many thousands of threats and promises; and the people of Nineveh demonstrate such a rich faith, though they are frightened by only a single word of threat and though they are without the solace of one word of promise. But that's the way it goes: Where the Word of God grows sparsely, there the hunger for it and the earnestness with which it is sought are strong; but where it flourishes abundantly, there a satiety and a disdain for it are found.<sup>24</sup>

Again, Luther writes:

The story of Jonah has been transmitted to us because God wants to show us His miracles, namely, that God's Word bears fruit mainly where this is least expected and, conversely, produces least where most is expected. Here we find the heathen of Nineveh coming to faith, though they had not heard the Word of God before;

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snatch them from the devil's jaws solely through this: that they know Him and who He is.' ... Likewise, Jeremiah 9[:23-24] says: 'Let no one boast of his wisdom nor of his might nor of his riches' – in short, let no one boast at all – 'but if anyone wants to boast, let him boast in this, that he knows Me and knows who I am: the Lord, who does good and establishes righteousness and justice on earth.'" Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 69, pp. 35, 36. This Knowledge of God, namely, who the True God is and that He is merciful for Christ's sake, saves because it restores in man the Image of God. Man was created in the Image of God, i.e. man was created to know the True God and to have a happy relationship with God. But after sin, such a happy relationship with God was not possible and man flees from God. Christ, however, restores the happy Knowledge of God through the Gospel because through the Gospel comes the remission of sins and, therefore, reconciliation with God and a right and happy relationship with God.

**"113. What was the image of God?** The image of God consisted in this – A. That man *knew God* and was *perfectly happy* in such knowledge. 263 [Ye] have put on the new man, which is renewed in *knowledge* after the *image of Him that created him*. Col. 3:10 B. That man was *perfectly holy* and blessed. 264 Put on the new man, which *after God* is created in *righteousness and true holiness*. Eph. 4:24. ... **114. Does man still bear the image of God?** Man *lost* the image of God when he *fell into sin*. In *believers*, a *beginning* of its renewal is made. Only in *heaven*, however, will this image be *fully* restored. 265 [Adam] begat a son *in his own likeness*, after his image. Gen. 5:3. ... 266 I will *behold Thy face in righteousness*; I shall be satisfied, when I awake, *with Thy likeness*. Ps. 17:15." *The Small Catechism*, pp. 96, 97.

<sup>24</sup>*Luther's Works*, Vol. 19, pp. 89, 90.



and we find that the Jews, who heard the Word of God daily, abandon their faith.<sup>25</sup>

So, we see in the conversion of the metropolis of Nineveh the great power inherent in the Gospel at all times. That all men don't believe lies not in the lack of power in the Gospel, for the conversion of Nineveh confirms once again the Power of God in the Gospel, but rather the darkness of the hearts of men in unbelief. But for those who do believe, the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. St. Paul the Apostle writes:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.<sup>26</sup>

### **B. The Power of the Gospel delivers life eternal and the resurrection of the body.**

And the Gospel again is manifested to be powerful because it delivers to men life eternal and the resurrection of the body. The Gospel delivered to the people of Nineveh the resurrection of the body. For Jesus says that the citizens of Nineveh will rise up and condemn the Jews of Christ's generation for not believing the Gospel. Jesus says:

An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas *is* here. The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, beheld, a greater than Solomon *is* here.<sup>27</sup>

And enjoying the resurrection from the dead, the men of Nineveh also enjoy life everlasting.

And this Power and Blessing of life eternal and the resurrection extends to all men. For the Gospel doesn't change. It is the Power of God unto salvation for the men of Nineveh, for the men in Christ's time, and for us, and for men of all time, to as many as believe.

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<sup>25</sup>Luther's Works, Vol. 19, p. 96.

<sup>26</sup>**Romans 1:16-17.**

<sup>27</sup>**St. Matthew 12:39, 40-42.**

## **Conclusion**

Penitential seasons like Lent are not miserable, dreary exercises in futility because they focus on the Gospel; and the Gospel, as we've seen with the conversion of the metropolis of Nineveh, works. The conversion of the metropolis of Nineveh is confirmation of the Power of the Almighty inherent in the Word and Sacraments to save.

Lent becomes a wonderful time of joy because we see once again the power of the Gospel to deliver us and all men from the darkness of our sin and unbelief.

And we look forward to the glorious day when we shall join our Christian brothers, including the men of Nineveh, and Christians down through the ages in Christ's Eternal Kingdom of Glory.

*Amen.*