



Epiphany 3-January 24, 2021
Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish
Jonah 3:1-5, 10 and Mark 1:14-20

“Short Sermons”

-Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from his son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the first lessons that I learned from the councils of this parish when I started serving as Vicar of these congregations in 2016 and I have been reminded every year since, is that on the Sunday when this parish has their annual meetings, I am to keep the service and the sermon short. In the first reading for today, Jonah was told by the Lord to do the same when he was told to preach to the wicked people of Nineveh. In the gospel for today, Jesus preached his first sermon. This too is a short sermon that would be an example for his disciples to follow as they are sent out to preach.

I suppose the length of a sermon can be a bit subjective. I think as a rule, sermons have shortened over the past 50 years. I recall sermons rarely less than 20 minutes, but today if they last longer than 12 minutes, I can see squirming in the pews. The length of sermons also depends on the church. You may have been in churches where the prayers of the church are longer than my sermons. Some churches give you a break to go home and have lunch and come back later in the afternoon to hear the ending of the sermon. Jesus himself preached a longer sermon than what you heard him preach today when he preached what became known as “The Sermon on the Mount”. One of my mentors who visited our parish and listened to a couple of my sermons suggested that my sermons could be longer, but I have not heard that suggestion from any of you and certainly not for today’s service.

When a sermon is long, you will usually notice that it is full of words that tell you what you should do and what you should not do. This is the case with Jesus’ sermon on the mount. That long sermon from Jesus would be better described as a Confirmation lesson rather than a sermon. When a sermon is short and something happens immediately, you know that it has been the gospel that has been preached. The gospel which gives you nothing to do but delivers short promises of what God has done for you such as “You are mine.” “I forgive you.” “This is my body and blood, given and shed for you.” “I will raise you from the grave.” When the gospel is delivered in a sermon the words are few to prevent you from confusing what God has done for you with the long list of things you are to do in this life for God and for your neighbor. When a short sermon is preached and the words were given by God, things happen as Mark said, immediately.

In the first lesson for today, we heard that this was not the first time that Jonah had been given this sermon to preach to Nineveh. Jonah would have delivered a longer sermon to the wicked people of Nineveh. Jonah would have preferred delivering his version of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount described in detail all the things that these wicked people were doing wrong and what they should do to correct their ways. Jonah would have wanted the people of the town to come back and listen to him preach a sermon series for several weeks to give them more suggestions on how they should be living their lives and then evaluate each week if they had made

any progress toward becoming better people. Maybe he would ask members of the town to give some personal testimonies of the personal progress they feel they had accomplished.

However, when the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, it was the same word that came from the Lord to Jonah the first time. Jonah was given a specific time, place, and message to preach when the Lord told him. The Lord said, "Get up, go to Nineveh, and say these words". "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown". This time Jonah did as he was commanded to do. Maybe after Jonah thought about this sermon, he too thought who would listen to such a short sermon without giving these people a list of things to change in their lives. Even Jonah likely doubted that this short sermon would have any effect and the exceedingly large city of Nineveh would not repent and would be overthrown. After Jonah delivered this 8-word sermon, there was no annual meeting scheduled to decide what to do with this message that was delivered to them. There was no special city council meeting called to see how they could help stop the destruction of the city. Instead, when God's word was delivered by this reluctant preacher, the people believed. The people did not decide to change their ways on their own. It wasn't until Jonah, the preacher, arrived and walked three days into the middle of this large city and delivered a short sermon that these people immediately turned from their evil ways. The city didn't wait 39 days to think about this message and make a change in the nick of time before it was destroyed. The people of the city didn't go home to mull over what Jonah preached and come back in the afternoon hoping there was a part 2 to the sermon. The short sermon that Jonah was given to preach is what turned the city around and immediately it created faith simply through the preaching and hearing of God's word.

This is much like the short sermon that the Lord gave Jesus to preach. Jesus who was still wet from his baptism had learned that John who had just baptized him was put into prison. This should have been a clue for Jesus to preach something different from what John preached so that he wouldn't get the kind of treatment. John wasn't imprisoned for breaking any serious laws of the town. He was imprisoned because there were people who didn't like what he was preaching. These people did not want to believe that God's preached word alone would do what it said. John preached a baptism of repentance and forgiveness. But the people either wanted John to preach a longer sermon that would give them an active role in their salvation, or they would shut him up by putting him in prison. And that is what they chose to do.

Jesus was not given a longer first sermon to preach. Jesus didn't give his hearers 40 days to make a decision on their own. Jesus declared the time has come. The time was now. And the place, the kingdom of God was not coming, but it had arrived. The time and the place were set, and his message was short. "Repent and believe in the good news." Jesus had shortened Jonah's short sermon down to 7 words.

This short message although difficult to believe has never changed. This message of mercy by God's word alone was given to the disciples Simon, Andrew, James and John. When they heard it, they immediately left what the occupation of fishing that their father had taught them to preach this short message of the gospel to others.

Once you have heard the gospel, there is nothing more to hear. Jesus immediately sends the hearer's home. Now you too have heard this good news. This short sermon given by the Lord which never changes. A word that immediately does what God said it would do. You have been turned around by God's word of mercy and forgiveness. You have been freed by me to go home..... but the chairman of your congregation would like you to stay for the annual meeting. Amen.

