**Morning Devotion for Friday, April 24, 2020**

**“A Fish Story”**

**Welcome to Morning Devotion at Trinity Lutheran Church.**

**One of the most well known, interesting, and misinterpreted narrative in the Bible is the story of Jonah, at least that part of it recorded in chapter one, verse seventeen through chapter two, verse ten.**

**Jonah was called to be a prophet of God, but when God directed him to go to the most powerful, pagan empire in the world, the Assyrians, to go into the capitol city of the empire, Nineveh, and call their king and people to repentance for their idolatry and immorality, Jonah headed in the opposite direction as far as he could go. But he learned you can’t run away from the Lord. The ship on which he was a passenger got into a storm, so when the superstitious captain and crew came to the conclusion that the gods were angry, and Jonah, who knew the one, true God, came to a similar conclusion, Jonah saw that he couldn’t escape from God. At that point Jonah preferred death by drowning to carrying out his prophetic duty. The crew, with Jonah’s permission, cast him overboard, and actually prayed to his God to not hold his life against them. They picked him up, tossed him into the deep, and watched with amazement as the storm disappeared. We read the text, 1:17:**

***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. Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish* [Jonah’s prayer is recorded in the second chapter of his little book; on the physical side of this inspired poem is a detailed account of what it would be like if one could descend to the bottom of the ocean alive; for example, he saw mountains at the bottom of the deep. . .on the spiritual side, Jonah becomes aware that he is not going to die that day, either by drowning or by digestion, but is being saved by an unprecedented divine miracle. His faith is rekindled, and he vows to serve the Lord, his Savior] we pick it up at 2:10 *And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.***

**I remember a mentor professor from a class I took in the Department of Religious Studies here at Missouri State University, 1978. I was actually working on a Masters degree program in the English department, but this particular class was a crossover credit; in those “olden” days, public high schools offered a class called “The Bible as Literature.” This professor surprised me because he was of a liberal, critical bent, referring to the Jonah narrative said, “Now that is a fish story. . .and, you know I used to think in my younger days it was just that, sort of a fairy tale with a good meaning, but the older I’ve become and the more versed in the other Scriptures, the more I come close to believing that it really happened; but it is still quite a fish story!”**

**Quite coincidentally for the other class I was taking that semester was in the English department, and I was writing a paper on Herman Melville’s great classic, *Moby Dick*. That, too, is quite a fish story. Just a year before in my student teaching at Hillcrest High School here in Springfield, I had taught this book to a junior/senior high school elective course in American Literature. Both times I noted how packed *Moby Dick* was with Biblical illusions. For example, there is a character named Queeqpeg, loved by all the crew. He was seized by a deadly fever, but recovered. Haunted by his near-death experience and taking no chances for the future, he paid the ship’s carpenter to build him a custom coffin in the shape of a canoe. Nothing more is said of the coffin as the story returns to the main plot, Captain Ahab and his fatal obsession with the great whale Moby Dick. When the whale smashes the boat to pieces and the crew is tossed overboard to be eaten by sharks, Ishmael, the story-teller, floundering in the water (pun intended) is about to be sucked into the vortex of the sinking ship when a black bubble shoots up from under the water and lands near Ishmael. It is the canoe-shaped coffin. Climbing into it with his last bit of strength, he floats for a day and a night and then is rescued by a passing ship.**

**Yes Moby Dick, too, is quite a fish story!**

**The early Christians, facing persecution from the end of the first century well into the fourth century—sometimes quite intense and severe—had “secret” code language and symbols, to communicate and mark places of assembly and worship. In the early second century, the Ichthus emerged, and in the next two centuries became very popular in use. The Koine (common) Greek letters are the first letters for the phrase “Jesus Christ Son of God Savior,” and their shape is akin to a fish, so the symbol of the fish, still alive today in Christian art and décor (and on vehicle bumper stickers!), marked places of worship without being too obvious.**

**This fish, the Ichthus, is quite a fish story, too, the biggest fish story of all. Jonah’s whale performed the same ministry for him, that the Ark did for Noah and his family, preserving their lives and the Church’s ministry, in a fallen world drowned out by sin and evil. As Noah lived to proclaim and teach God’s Word to generations and generations that were born after him, Jonah went to Nineveh and proclaimed God’s Word. Even Ishmael survived such a colossal destruction caused by human obsession and foolishness, and he lived to tell his story to others who might learn from it.**

**The Church is our Noah’s ark in our world, a world also drowning in sin, violence, and death. When it all threatens to swallow us alive, God is our Life-Saver. And because of Easter, our own coffins (some of them—we don’t know—may already be built and waiting for us at the undertaker’s), are nothing more than the canoes that will spring up from our graves on the Last Day with great buoyancy, so that we can float and sail to our real home.**

[Thank you for joining us today; does anyone else feel like going fishing? Our Morning Devotions at Trinity will resume next Monday and continue until next Friday, May 1st. May God bless you and your household today.]