

2012 Live Sunday Sermon

Title: Our Relenting God

Jonah 3:1-10

Rev. Dr. James I. Lamb, executive director, Lutherans For Life

Can an entire city be forgiven? What about a nation? Sin, repentance, forgiveness—these are not trivial issues for the Christian. We must understand and deal with these matters, but we do so from the perspective of the Good News that tells us:

THE CERTAINTY OF FORGIVENESS LIES NOT IN OUR ABILITY TO REPENT BUT IN
GOD’S MERCY TO RELENT FOR THE SAKE OF JESUS.

In Nineveh we see our relenting God in action. Nineveh needed a relenting God! God had said, “[T]heir evil has come up before me” (1:2). The book of Jonah does not relate the kinds of evil, but the prophet Nahum gives a bleak picture. “Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder—no end to the prey!” (Nah 3:1)

God sends Jonah to call them to repentance. The message was short and to the point. “Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown!” (3:4) The Word of God worked! The people believed God. He convicts them of their sin and gives them repentant hearts. The king of Nineveh himself gets into the act and commands everyone to show signs of repentance—to fast and wear sackcloth. He even commands this for the animals! He takes no chances. “Who knows? God may turn and relent...” (v 9).

God does relent. I’m sure He was pleased with their outward display of repentance as they sat in ashes. But He wasn’t so much moved to relent by cows and sheep walking around covered in sackcloth as He was by a Lamb covered in blood, His Lamb, His Son, Jesus.

God looked ahead to that awful, wonderful Friday and in His mercy, for the sake of that coming sacrifice, relented of the disaster He planned for Nineveh. This “bloody city, all full of lies and plunder” is spared from what it truly deserved.

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Now what I am about to say will not set well with some of you. But it is the truth, and it is truth we need to talk about in our churches especially on this January 22 the 38th anniversary of the Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion. Whether you are comfortable hearing it or not, the truth is that abortion has made this country a bloody country "all full of lies and plunder." Like Nineveh, we need a relenting God.

Abortion is a gruesome procedure carried out over 3,000 times every day in this country. That's 1.2 million abortions every year. In the bloody Civil War, approximately 1.6 million Americans were killed. We've repeated that number thirty-three times since 1973. In this war on our own, fifty-three million tiny Americans—vulnerable, innocent, defenseless—have been struck down.

Our country is one full of lies when it comes to abortion. Every day thousands of vulnerable women hear the lies. "Abortion is your only choice." That's a lie. There are other, life-affirming choices and thousands ready to support women in those choices. "Don't worry, it won't hurt much." Another lie. Abortion hurts physically and emotionally, and spiritually. "It will all be over soon." The most deadly lie. An Abortion affects you for the rest of your life.

Since Christians have over 70 percent of abortions, there may very well be someone here who knows what I mean about abortion affecting you the rest of your life. You might be feeling very guilt-ridden and uncomfortable right now. So let me have a word just with you. And it really is a single word, welcome! Welcome here with the rest of us sinners. It is not the sin of abortion that separates us from God. Sin does that. As we said earlier, the book of Jonah does not even mention the kinds of sins that were going on. It doesn't really matter. Whether it was the sin of witchcraft or the sin of gossiping, all the Ninevites were guilty before God and deserved His wrath.

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When God relented of that wrath, everyone was covered regardless of their sin. The “size” of the sin does not influence God’s action. His relenting flows from His boundless mercy in Christ Jesus to *all* repentant sinners.

This devastating affect abortion has on women is another indication that we live in a bloody country “full of lies and plunder.” So what should we do about it? Should the Church take the prophetic role of Jonah and yell and scream about great disasters that God will bring upon our nation if it does not repent?

I’m not sure yelling and screaming is ever appropriate, but it is true that Christians are to influence society. But before we can do that there is something we need to do first, repent!

If we are going to change things out there in society regarding the God-given value of human life, then we need to change things in here first, in our own hearts. We need to repent of our indifference to the tragedy of abortion. We need to repent of our failure to acknowledge the spiritual aspect of abortion, our failure to defend the weak and helpless, and our failure to show compassion to those facing crisis pregnancies or those dealing with past mistakes.

Let’s take a few moments to discuss why these things are so. Science reveals very clearly the humanity of the unborn from the moment of conception. But God’s Word reveals that it is much more. God formed that human being with His hands. Jesus shed his blood on the cross for that human being. God desires to call that human being into an eternal relationship with Him.

Our value as a human being comes from what God has done and not from anything we do. That lifts these issues way above being mere social or political issues. Every life is valuable to God, whether you live in a house or live in a womb, whether you are up and walking around or confined to a wheelchair and unable to walk, whether you are making a name for yourself or no longer able to remember anyone’s name.

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Thus, as Christians, we are not for life and opposed to abortion because the children are precious. We are for life because the children are precious to God. We are not for life because we live in a society that isn't, but because we serve a God who is. This means that speaking up for life is not an option for Christians. We are *compelled* to do so.

That is why we must repent of our silence in the midst of the bloody destruction of children created and redeemed by God. We must repent of our indifference and excuses as we relegate issues of life and death to the secular realm. We must repent of our lack of compassion for women and thinking that abortion is the best way to help them out of a difficult situation. And, for those who have been involved in for-life activities and life organizations, perhaps there is a need to repent of the *manner* in which we deal with these issues.

When we do repent, God will look at us through the cross of Jesus and relent. He will forgive and not bring upon us what our lack of respect for life deserves. He will forgive and give us the strength to change the way we think about these issues. Change in our society must begin here in our churches. It must begin here in our hearts.

When that happens, we will realize that we have something to say about the life issues. We have something to say that is more powerful than Jonah's threats of disaster. In fact, the Gospel of Jesus Christ gives us the most powerful and positive for life message in the universe. This message of victory over death, of hope in the midst of despair, of love for the vulnerable, of strength for the weak, and of good coming from suffering is tailor made for the life issues. Indeed, it is the only message that can truly change hearts and minds and lives.

So how do we share that message? Do we take a three-day journey like Jonah through the streets of our community blaring out a threats from loudspeakers on top of our cars? No, first we educate ourselves on these issues and learn what God's Word says about them. Lutherans For Life can help with that. They produce materials that help make that connection between God's

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Word of life and the life issues. [Here, if appropriate, you may want to point people to a display of LFL materials or to the LFL website published in the bulletin or mention studies on these issues that have been scheduled in the congregation.]

To share this message we also have to care for those dealing with them. [Share opportunities available in your congregation or area such as human care teams or local pregnancy centers or hospice centers.]

Finally, we can give witness to the value of human life in our daily walk as Christian citizens. We can defend the vulnerable as we speak in love about the value of each human life through the things we say and do. We can look for opportunities to share with others the *source* of that value in our creating, redeeming, and calling God. The life issues give opportunity, not just to call wrong things wrong, but to share what our loving God has done about wrong things in His Son, Jesus Christ. We can speak of our God and His love for the weak and helpless. We can speak of His love and healing for those hurting and despairing. We can speak of our relenting God.

Sad to say, but because of abortion, we live in a bloody country “full of lies and plunder.” We live in a country that needs to repent and change. But the beginning of that change takes place in our hearts as we repent of our indifference toward the God-given value of human life. Then, armed with the Gospel of Jesus, the most powerful and positive for-life message in the universe, we can be God’s instruments in changing people’s hearts and minds. Who knows? God may relent and restore our country once again to a place where human life is upheld in our churches and in our society. Amen!

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