

## Mark 9:42-47

These words of Jesus in our text, I doubt if any of us have them on a plaque mounted on the wall in our home. Millstones around the neck and tossed into the sea, cutting off hands and feet and plucking out eyes, the word “hell” mentioned three times. These are not the words of Jesus which are the most endearing to us. Nor are they words that pastors enjoy preaching on. Unless, perhaps, they have a mind to pound their hearers with the Law. But that is not my goal this morning. Keep in mind that whatever I preach to you, I also preach to myself. If you deserve a millstone, so do I. If you have body parts that should be cut off, so do I. We’re in this together.

This text may frighten us from the sound of it. But only if we are humble. A proud Pharisee would not be frightened. He would immediately think of dozens of other people, but not himself, who deserve a millstone around the neck, and who should be missing hands, feet, and eyes. The proud Pharisee, in his opinion, has not caused others to sin, nor have his hands, feet, and eyes caused him to sin. But a humble Christian admits that he is not without sin. And he confesses that he has sinned against others; even against those who are weak and little in the faith, so that his sin has hurt them.

In Jesus’ day it was widely held that the sea was the devil’s realm. To be thrown into the sea, therefore, amounts to being cast to Satan. St. Paul commanded the congregation in Corinth to do this to a man who was living in sexual sin. “*You are to deliver this man to Satan,*” writes Paul in 1 Corinthians 5, “*for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*” The man was unwilling to repent. And no one in the congregation was willing to do anything about it. “Shame on all of you,” says Paul. “Throw him into the sea with a millstone around his neck. It’s the only way to save his soul from hell.” How is one delivered to Satan? How is one cast into the sea? By confronting him. Rebuking him. If he refuses to repent, by then taking God’s grace away from him...giving him, not heaven, but hell.

To an extent, we do this here every Sunday. God throws us into the sea. His Law convicts us. It’s harsh. It picks us up and casts us into the realm of the devil. And by the grace and working of God within us, we agree that the Law is good and that it is right. “That is what I deserve,” we confess to God. “*I, a poor, miserable sinner do deserve eternal punishment. I deserve to be thrown into the sea wearing a millstone around my neck.*”

We are like Jonah who was picked up and tossed into the sea by all the sailors on the ship. And as he told them that it was good and right to do that, so in our confession of sin, we admit the same thing to God and to each other.

But was this the end of Jonah? No, nor is it the end of us. Jonah, after he was thrown into the sea, was swallowed up by a great fish, and after three days and nights, he was returned to the land from where he had come.

When God’s Law throws us into the sea, we also are resurrected on the third day, not with Jonah, but with Christ. As Jonah was cast back out of the sea, so God brings you back from Satan’s realm by announcing to you that He forgives you in Christ.

You follow Jesus into His death and resurrection. He was hurled into the sea. God the Father threw His Son into the realm of Satan by His sufferings and death on the cross. Jesus wore around His neck the millstone that was weighted with your sins and mine, and with the sins of the whole world. He died and He was buried in that sea. But on the third day He rose from that sea. He came back from the devil's domain alive and victorious. It was no fish that had swallowed Jesus. It was Satan himself. But He broke into pieces the jaws of the devil. And so now, when you cast yourself into the sea by confessing your sins, that sea cannot hold you; it cannot bury you in its depths. For in your Baptism you are joined to Christ. And so you rise out of the water restored, alive, forgiven.

So now back to Jonah. Tossed into the sea, but resurrected out of the sea, he traveled to Nineveh and preached to the people of that city. But when they repented, he became angry, for he did not want God to spare them. Jonah wanted Nineveh to be destroyed. He did what he was called to do. He did not hurt the people of Nineveh, for he preached God's Word to them. He did not sin against them. But now Jonah was hurting himself. Now he, and not the people of Nineveh, needed to repent. Jonah sat down under a large plant and he pouted. He did not want God to show mercy to Nineveh. Unless Jonah repented, he was in danger of facing the very destruction he had warned Nineveh about.

Like Jonah, you and I came out of the sea with Christ in our Baptism. Are we now free from sin? No. We are free from the curse of sin. But our eyes, hands, feet, and every part of our body will drag us through sin into hell if we let it. And so, "*cut it off!*" says Jesus. "Cut off your hand, foot, or eye." Not with a knife, but with the scalpel of God's Word.

No one who avoids hearing the Word of God is safe from the fires of hell. God did not free you from the curse of sin in your Baptism with Christ so that you could go sit with Jonah under that plant. That is not the way of the Baptized. Jesus loves you too much to let you perish. "*It is better for you...*" He says in our text. What is better? To let God's Holy Spirit cut away at our sinful flesh with the sword, the scalpel, of the Word so that we enter, not the unquenchable fire, but into the life eternal.

No Christian enters heaven without scars and wounds. The disease of sin rips at us daily, but the Holy Spirit is a skilled surgeon, and He attacks the sin and unbelief within us in order to pour on the healing balm of Jesus' blood.

And so you who are the Baptized are given also the Sacrament on the altar. Has sin been tearing at you? Has the Holy Spirit been cutting away at you? Now He leads you to Christ; to Him who makes you whole. There is no part of you which Jesus' flesh and blood does not heal. Come to the altar. Limp, stagger, crawl if you must. Are you missing hands, feet, or eyes? Here is Jesus' body for you. He restores what you are missing. And His blood heals your wounds.

Jesus is pure forgiveness for you -- God's forgiveness for all the sins you have done. Not one of you has sinned too greatly that Jesus' blood cannot cleanse you. Not one of you has used your hand, foot, eye, or any part of your body in such a sinful manner that all hope for you is gone. Each one of you is forgiven. Every part of your body is forgiven. Jesus says so. Here is His body and blood for you to assure you that this forgiveness is real, and that it is for you. Amen.