

Jonah 2:2-9

February 6, 2011 – 5th SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

You Are the Light of the World

✧ **Shine in distress.** (vv.2,3)

✧ **Shine in danger.** (vv.4-7)

✧ **Shine in grace!** (vv.8,9)

In the name of Jesus, the Light of the world, dear fellow reflectors of that Light:

What do you think of when Jesus says, “*You are the light of the world*” (Matthew 5:14) ? He’s speaking to us together using the plural form of “*You*” to tell us something about how we shine. It certainly is not by our own light. That only seems to work when the sun is shining and life is good. But what about when the money runs out or health runs away, when friends are hard to find, and “seldom is heard and encouraging word”? Hard life demonstrates how dark and dismal is that “inner light” of human wisdom. But when Jesus the Light of the world shines on us through His holy Word and sacraments, the darkest room on earth, the human heart, is filled with His bright blessings of peace and joy. **You Are the Light of the World. Shine in distress. Shine in danger. Shine in grace!** reflecting Jesus’ face.

✧ **Shine in distress.** (vv.2,3)

Sometimes it’s fun to ask our grandparents what were their darkest times when they were **in distress**. As a teenager, I used to visit my Great Grandpa Werner about a quarter mile down the road. He would tell me stories of working in the coal mines when he was twelve. A mule kicked up a stone that put out one of his eyes. It was always glazed over all the years I knew him. For my father-in-law the stories of **distress** go back to terrifying typhoons in the Pacific during his Navy service in World War II. Most of us don’t live such a dramatic life, but we know what it means to be **in distress**.

Only one Man ever lived deeper in **distress** than Jonah in the prayer of our sermon text. “*In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.*” We can’t begin to imagine the dark room of Jonah’s **distress**. No room freshener could kill the stench of dead fish. There was no breeze. Stomach goo and gastric juices are not meant for human habitation. God had used a huge fish to rescue Jonah. He prayed from the fish’s belly.

Do you remember how Jonah got there? His prayer recalls God’s anger: “*You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.*” The sailors on the ancient ore boat bound for Tarshish did not want to throw Jonah overboard. But when they woke him up in the raging storm, they were **in distress**. So they held a lottery, and Jonah “won.” He had told them he was running away from God. Now he told them they had to throw him into the sea. The sailors cried to the LORD, “*O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased.*” (1:14) Jonah knew God was angry with him. He was responsible for his own **distress**.

What shall we do when we must say the same? How can we live when we deserve to die? People may be okay with us, but how can we survive when God is angry? Confess your sin, my fellow sinners. Admit the guilt that runs away from God. Repent and turn to Him in prayer. As you **Shine in distress**....

✧ **Shine in danger.** (vv.4-7)

In one of his sermons Martin Luther described our situation like Jonah’s: “With the help and support of the Spirit, we run to an angry God, looking for his undeserved kindness in the middle of his anger. When we lift our heart in this way, we willingly endure punishment from God and we continue to look for his mercy. Notice what strong character such a heart must have. Though surrounded by God’s anger and punishment, it doesn’t seem to be aware of them. Instead it sees and feels only God’s kindness and mercy. Though the heart is clearly aware of God’s anger and punishment, it simply doesn’t want to

see or feel them. Rather, it's determined to look for God's kindness and mercy – no matter how hidden they might be.”¹

And how could they be more hidden than for Jonah **in danger** in the deep? Who has ever survived to tell about it? *“The engulfing waters threatened me,” “even to the soul”* (KJV). *“The deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.”* Plunging far beneath the surface, Jonah could not see which way was up. You can dive right into the bottom. Jonah was imprisoned by water. But Jesus, the Light of the world did not stop shining on him. Far beneath the sea, Jonah summoned the courage of humble, repentant faith. He said, *“I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.”* He was not disappointed: *“You brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God.”*

What anxious cares endanger your heart today? Is it something you said? Something you did? Something you should have done long ago, but lost the one chance you had? Is there no way to go back and make it right? To heal that hurt look on the face of someone you love? To soothe the heart of a child, hurt by angry words from your lips? Here in the deep, **in danger** of your soul, pray to the Lord of mercy and grace. His kindness never fails. God's love cannot be drowned by water or sin or Satan or death. His love still surrounds you when other helpers fail and comforts flee. Though we have forsaken Him by sinning, we still can hope in Him today. *“Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you”* (Hebrews 13:5), He says to you and to me. **Shine in danger....**

☆ Shine in grace! (vv.8,9)

Again, from one of those comforting comments of Martin Luther: “God is easily moved to forgive. These are promises that are very beautiful, very rich, very broad. They are held forth by the Holy Spirit for this purpose, that in a time of the wrath and anger of the Lord the feeble heart or conscience which is looking for consolation should run to them and remember them....He terrifies sinners in such a way that they lift up their hearts in hope and in the mercy of God. This is the custom of the prophets – they first terrify with very violent and bitter threats, but they immediately add very great, very sweet promises about the mercy and goodness of God.”²

God's mercy and goodness are objective realities; they're true whether you them believe or not. The greatest challenge of a rescue swimmer is not the raging sea, but the fearful heart of the one he wants to save. What can God do if you keep relying on your own strength instead of His? If you grab in terror around his neck, a rescue swimmer will dive away and come back up from behind. God may need to let you feel your weakness in order to grab you with His **grace**. He knows you cannot save yourself. *“All our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”* (Isaiah 64:4) Who can wash a white wall with greasy hands? Or vacuum a carpet with mud on his boots? Who can possibly improve on God's **grace** in Christ?

Jonah put it so well as the Holy Spirit helped him **Shine in grace!** *“Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.”* Your job, your career, your marriage, your friends – whatever comes between you and God is a worthless idol, as useless on the high seas as clinging to a little rubber ducky. But when God holds you in Christ, you **Shine in grace!** With Jonah we pray to God: *“But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD.”* We have all given our solemn vow to be faithful to God even in the face of death. Since *“salvation comes from the LORD,”* Jesus alone can keep us true to that promise. Christ alone has gone deeper into **distress** and **danger** than we or Jonah could ever go. Jesus plunged beneath the wrath of God for our sins. From the depths of the grave He brought life and liberty to light through the Gospel. Jesus is the **grace** of God that picks us off the bottom so we can **Shine in grace!** In the heart of the sea you can see the heart of God. He's got a grip on you. He will not let you go. Jesus says, **You Are the Light of the World. Shine** in the LORD's mighty power. Amen.

¹ Martin Luther. Reading from *By Faith Alone*. Copyright © 1998 by World Publishing Inc....under license to Laridian.

² *Luther's Works*, American Edition. (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1975), Vol. 18, p. 97.

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