

# THE ORIGINAL FISH FISHER

Sermon, January 25, 2015

Texts: Jonah 2:1-3:5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

Our lectionary texts for this morning tell us of people who left boats behind to follow divine callings. In Mark's Gospel, we have Andrew and Peter and the Zebedee boys leaving their boats at once to follow the divine call ... and then we have Jonah, who apparently took a little more convincing. *"O, the deep, deep love of Jesus,"* we just sang, *"Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free; rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me. Underneath me, all around me, is the current of Thy love."* Well, Jonah knows something about that from first hand experience! For Jonah, the deep, deep, oceanic love of God was *literally* underneath him, all around him, engulfing him and almost drowning him ... and that deep, deep love graciously, if not a bit roughly, did what it took to restore Jonah, to rescue Jonah, and to lead Jonah to where God wanted him to go and to who He designed him to be.

As is often the case, I'm always on the lookout for a catchy sermon title. Fish Fisher is the name of someone who is something of an "original;" he is a country, folk and "Southern Rock" singer-songwriter from Toledo, Ohio, billed as "The Godfather of Ghetto-billy." According to the official Fish Fisher website, he will be performing at the Commodore in Nashville, Tennessee on Saturday, Feb 3 ... and I understand tickets are still available.<sup>1</sup> Yes, he's pretty original, but THE original "Fish Fisher" is the fish who fished for Jonah! This Fish Fisher fished Jonah out of the deep, and in doing so, rescued, saved, restored and helped renew Jonah to his divine calling.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus says to these fishermen, Andrew and Peter and the Zebedee brothers, that he will make them not Fish Fishers, but Man Fishers. *"I'll make you fishers of men,"* Now, in Luke's version of this account, Jesus says to these fishermen in so many words, *"I'll make you catchers of men."* (what He actually says is *"From now on you will catch men."*) There is something of a nuance in the original Greek text found only in Luke's account. This word translated "catch" literally means *"to take or capture alive."* It also can also be translated *"to save alive, to rescue, to restore to strength and life, to revive."* We all know that fishermen usually catch fish in order to kill them and eat and/or sell them ... but Jesus is certainly NOT calling His disciples to catch to eat and/or sell other people! Luke's nuance indicates the type of fishing involved in being fishers of men is to *"take alive and rescue,"* they are called to do what they can in the name of Jesus to preserve others to life, to restore others, to revive others ... much like the original Fish Fisher in our Old Testament reading "caught" and rescued and delivered and preserved Jonah. The God-ordained efforts of the original Fish Fisher also, by the way, led to the rescue and deliverance and the restoration and the revival of countless Ninevites. To catch in this sense is *rescue*, it is to catch people from falling, it is to do what we can to catch and/or prevent people from falling into harm and/or to save people who have fallen into harm, to restore them to their God-ordained purposes in life. "Fishers of men" join Jesus' mission in catching people, saving people, rescuing people, restoring people, and trying to prevent them from falling! That's *our* calling.

Now, hold that thought for a bit.

When we speak of God being gracious, we are not saying God is always nice. We *are* saying God often does whatever is necessary to save us, to rescue us, to restore us, to redeem us ... even if it is to save us from ourselves, precisely *because* He loves us and wants the best for us. He intervenes, disrupts, perseveres and insists on giving us what we need, which isn't always necessarily what we want. Sometimes His grace arrives in pretty dramatic ways. Just ask Jonah. If you, like Jonah, have been running away from God, I can assure you that you'd better get ready for some high drama in your life. Like Jonah, you can do it the easy way or you can do it the hard way. When we cooperate with what we know to be the will of God, life is generally quite good. When we don't, however, life can get pretty stormy.

You all know the story. Jonah was a prophet, and God called him to go on this mission to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, one of Israel's more notorious enemies, and about five hundred miles northeast of Jonah's home town (if you go five hundred miles northeast of here, you'll wind up in Caribou, Maine, about a hundred miles north of Portland). Jonah's response was to jump on a west bound boat headed across the Mediterranean to Tarshish. Tarshish was on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean Sea; it's basically coastal Spain, near Gibraltar, about two thousand five hundred miles due west from Jonah's home town. So, that means the distance between where God wanted Jonah to go and the place where Jonah headed is a little over three thousand miles. Jonah headed in the opposite direction, almost exactly the distance from Portland, Maine to Portland Oregon (which, according to Mapquest.com, is 3,188 miles! I can almost imagine Jonah responding, *"Oh, you want me to go to Portland, Lord? OK, I'll go to Portland."*).

When we've looked at this story in years past, I mentioned Tarshish was a large and bustling port city, and was something of an ancient Shangri-La. We know from I Kings 10:22 and II Chronicles 9:21 (King James and Revised

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.fishfisher.net/home>

*Standard Versions* <sup>2)</sup> that when Solomon was building his temple, he sent his fleet of ships to Tarshish to get gold, silver, ivory ... and peacocks. Now, *that's* our idea of a mission field! We don't want to go to those backwater Ninevehs and offer mercy to our enemy; we don't want to go to some hostile foreign community and offer mercy to people we don't like and/or who have hurt us in the past. No, we'd much rather go hang out with the peacocks! Tarshish is the dream destination, a place of gold, silver, abundance and beautiful things. Tarshish is where we think we are supposed to go, that's the place where the will of God will certainly take us; that's the nice place where there is money and comfort and beautiful people and churches with great big budget surpluses. Surely that's where all of our hard work and careful living will take us. Not to Nineveh. Nineveh is not where we want to be.

Not to wax overly allegorical, but "Nineveh" is the name of **whatever** it is that you don't like, **wherever** it is you don't want to be, **whoever** it is who may have been cruel, harsh or unkind to you. Nineveh is your enemy. Nineveh is the place, or the person, that you'd prefer God would just go ahead and destroy. "*Judge 'em, God!*" But God doesn't want to destroy our enemy! God wants to rescue and redeem our enemy. God wants to offer grace and mercy and life to our enemy. That's His nature. And if that isn't confounding enough for us, more often than not we find that God also calls us to be an instrument of His grace and mercy to our enemy, just as He did with Jonah. God often calls us to be an instrument of grace and mercy and nurture and inspiration precisely to those people who may have rejected or hurt or slighted or misused us and/or those we love. God wasn't so much interested in judging Nineveh as He was in *redeeming* Nineveh. God loves Nineveh! He really does love the people who are there! And that is why He sent Jonah there. And wherever God has placed *you*, God loves the people there, as well.

When Jonah realized he had no choice but to accept God's calling, he told the sailors to get him off the boat and throw him headlong into the churning sea. Sometimes that's what it feels like to finally surrender to God's calling in your life, whatever that may be. You have no idea where this will lead, or how you will survive. You just have to do what you *know* you have to do and throw yourself in. Leave the boat behind! Jump into the calling ... and see the power of God like never before. Your mission, my mission, this church's mission, is simply to follow the divine call. Listen to Jesus, follow Him, leave behind anything that might hinder or keep you from following Him, even go overboard for Him. By the way ... when we obey His call, when we follow His leading, the life we are saving is ultimately our own. And when your life is being saved, it can't help but do wonders for all of those around you ... even if you are in Nineveh.

I'm struck that the response of the Ninevites was apparently immediate, it was profound, it was extensive. The text says, "*The Ninevites believed God.*" It wasn't so much that they believed *Jonah*, the text says they believed *God*. Wasn't this supposed to be a pagan nation? How can they even know who God is? Yet, they did something that even Jonah, the professed believer, did not do without extreme divine coercion: they BELIEVED AND OBEYED God upon hearing Jonah's God-given message. Implied, of course, is that the Ninevites apparently already knew quite a bit about this God they now believed. Jonah didn't "bring" God to the Ninevites; it is obvious that God was already there, He was already engaged there in many more ways than Jonah could even imagine! The Ninevites responded because God was at play there long before Jonah's arrival. If God is indeed God, then it stands to reason that He is alive and active throughout His entire creation ... including the Nineveh where God calls us to go and live and work and serve. All He needs are faithful prophets and disciples and missionaries who will go and help people understand the activity of the God Who is already there, actively engaged in their lives!

One more thought: Jonah is not in Nineveh because he is being punished. He is there because God has a mission and a purpose for him. That's important to note. God placed him there. I'm told that when the fourth century bishop Basil of Caesarea ordained his younger brother Gregory, he assigned him to the city of Nyssa. <sup>3</sup> Now, Nyssa was certainly not a Tarshish. Nyssa was a drab, dusty, dreary place in Asia Minor in what is now southwestern Turkey. It was certainly not a place where an aspiring clergyman built a good ecclesiastical career. So Gregory complained to his brother about this assignment in Nyssa. In response to this complaint, his older brother said, "*I have sent you to this city not to confer distinction upon you. I sent you there for you to confer distinction upon the city.*"

When we are in a place or situation we do not want to be in, we should not try to immediately get out and/or ask, "*What did I do to deserve this?*" The question we should be asking is, "*How am I to confer distinction on this place?*" God has placed YOU there; He has specifically gifted and equipped and prepared you for where He calls you to go. The question we should ask: How will I help make **where I am** a better place, a holier place?

We do that by obeying our divine call in our lives. And again, when we obey His call, the life we are saving is always our own. When your life is being saved, it can't help but do wonders for all of those around you, and you'll find yourselves heartily involved in Jesus' mission of being catchers of men ... even in your Nineveh.

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<sup>2</sup> *I don't profess to know what's all involved in the translation differences, but for some reason the Hebrew word translated "peacock" in the KJV and RSV is translated "baboon" in the NIV. There's probably a sermon in there somewhere! Also, the phrase "bound for Tarshish" found in the KJV and RSV is left out of the NIV, but footnoted at the bottom of the page. -- slc*

<sup>3</sup> *For more about Gregory of Nyssa, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gregory\\_of\\_Nyssa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gregory_of_Nyssa)*