

WHEN THE FISH IS THE FISHER

Sermon, January 24, 2021

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

Our lectionary texts for this morning tell of people who left boats behind to follow divine callings. In Mark's Gospel, we have Andrew and Peter and the Zebedee brothers leaving their boats immediately 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 deep, deep, oceanic love of God from first hand experience! For Jonah, it was *literally* underneath him, all around him, engulfing him, almost drowning him ... and that deep love of God 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 be who He designed him to be.

So, this first "fisher of men" in the Bible is an actual fish! This fish fisher fished Jonah out of the deep, and in doing so, rescued, saved, restored and helped Jonah, delivering him to fulfill his divine calling. In our Gospel reading today Jesus says to fishermen, Andrew and Peter and the Zebedee brothers, *"I'll make you fishers of men,"* that He will make them Men Fishers. Now, in Luke's version of this account, Jesus says to these fishermen in so many words, *"I'll make you catchers of men."* There is something of a nuance in the original Greek text found only in Luke's account. This word used in Luke that is 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 and/or otherwise misuse other people for your own purposes! Disciples of Jesus are never to misuse and/or ensnare and/or "devour" people for selfish gain or benefit. 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 "caught" and rescued and delivered and preserved and revived Jonah. And as we read earlier, 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 to *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 help 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 "catch" us from falling, 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. And if He has to, 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 ... well, life can get pretty stormy.

We 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 Warwick, 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 was a little over three thousand miles in the opposite direction, almost exactly the distance

from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon! I can imagine a reluctant Rhode Islander 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 how Tarshish was a large and bustling port city, and was something of an ancient Shangri-La. We know from I Kings and II Chronicles 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 wind up; that's the place where the will of God will certainly take us the nice place where there is money and comfort and beautiful people and a solid economy 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 wind up.

Not to wax overly allegorical, but I'm a pastor and pastors are prone to doing that ... "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 the place, or the person, or the politician, that you'd prefer God would just go ahead and destroy. Nineveh is your enemy. "*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. And wherever God has placed *you*, know that 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.

I'm always struck that the response of the Ninevites was apparently immediate, it was profound, and it was extensive. The text says, "*The Ninevites believed God.*" There's a sermon in itself here, but 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 God was already there, He was already engaged there in many more ways than Jonah could even imagine, long before Jonah's arrival. If God is indeed God, then it stands to reason 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 better 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. 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 ask is, "*How can I be of use to God in this place?*" God has placed YOU there; He has placed you here. God has specifically gifted and equipped and prepared you for where He calls you to go. The question we should ask: "*How can I help make where I am a better place?*" We do that by obeying the divine call in our lives. And when we do that, the life we are saving is always our own.

And when our lives are being saved, it can't help but do wonders for all of those around us; we find ourselves being catchers of men ... even in our Ninevehs.