



Sunday, January 24, 2021

Gone Fishing

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Jonah 3:1-10; Mark 1:14-20

The events of recent weeks in the nation's capital, including this past Wednesday's inauguration, have prompted me to wonder what is really going on, and how Christians of good faith, who may disagree on political matters, can respond effectively to all that they are experiencing.

We begin today with a passage with political implications. I have not preached about Jonah from that perspective in the past. Usually it is about how reluctant he was to do God's will. But seldom was it from the perspective of those to whom he was sent: the Ninevites. This time, we are going to look at the scene from their eyes.

It is hard to put ourselves in the Ninevites' shoes, or maybe I had best say sandals. They were not the kind of people with whom you wanted to spend time. They were the people in the capital city of the nation that was known for being aggressive, warlike, and merciless. They were perfectly content with that approach to life. It had gotten them and their people a lot more territory, more power, a thriving economy, and a leadership base that was firmly in control of matters.

If you agreed with that perspective, then you were happy as a clam at high tide. And if you did not, then, as long as you did not fall afoul of them, you were getting along pretty well.

The perspective of most Ninevites was: "Don't mess with success." It could have been the motto that they had on their bumper stickers, if they had bumpers.

Contrast that with the people who had been beaten by their nation, which was Assyria. The Assyrians were not benevolent dictators. They were anything but benevolent. They were expedient. They had strong views about how to govern, and anyone who got in their way was considered an enemy or a threat.

I am glad I did not live in those days.

And then along came Jonah the reluctant prophet, who eventually went to Nineveh as God had commanded, and told the people to repent, or else.

"Or else what?" They may have asked. "You are a pretty innocuous person to say such a thing. We have chariots, and bows and arrows, and soldiers galore, and we have prisons and torture chambers and places where, if we wish, we take people like you and they are never, ever, heard from again. So, babble on as you wish with your news — which we are sure is fake news, by the way. It will get you nowhere."

And Jonah thought, "I have been in the belly of a whale! If you want to see nowhere, I have been there and back! As sorry a place as your city is, it is somewhere. This is somewhere where real men and women and children live, where they have the same hopes and dreams as people who live down the road, and beyond — in fact, the same hopes and dreams as the people who are under your thumb. I did not choose to come to speak God's Word to you. It was God's idea. I did not want to warn you. I was hoping that God would just wipe you off the face of the earth by surprise, treating you the same way you treat others. I can quote that ancient code of conduct: *An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.* Prepare to be eyeless, and toothless, and worse, you Ninevites!"

Not the sort of talk that is designed to win friends and influence people.

However, lo and behold, it did influence them, and they did what Jonah said that God said they should do. They repented! That is possibly more surprising than the whole story about the giant fish that swallowed up Jonah — that people actually changed.

Because you have said it yourselves, “People never change. A leopard doesn’t change its spots.”

Now, I will not say that any number of people of an aggressively assertive type, who have decided that living pragmatically and without regard for others, live in our world today. But you might just happen to draw your own comparisons between the Assyrians of Nineveh and some people in our present day. And if you were to draw that conclusion, I would not argue with you.

Jonah was not amused that they repented. He wanted them to get what was coming to them. I can understand that sentiment. So, Jonah pouted; because he had been successful.

I wonder what the Ninevites did? Did they pout too? Or did they live in a new way? Scripture says they were forever changed for the better.

We could leave the matter there and find that there are conclusions to be drawn, such as:

- God is not pleased when people act like the Ninevites.
- God does something about it.
- What God does is rather unexpected.
- God sends a special messenger to such warlike, riotous troublemakers.
- God gives them a chance to change their ways.
- If they do that, God does not annihilate them as God could very well do.
- God must have a measure of mercy; God sees something good, even in people that we dislike and fear.

There are probably more points to make, but this is a sermon, not a book.

So then, we move ahead to the New Testament, and we find a very different story. Or do we? The thing that it has in common seems to be *fish* — Jonah and his one big fish, and the disciples and their nets full of fish. But does the New Testament message have something more to do with the Old Testament message? You decide. Here are the facts:

If Jonah is God’s messenger and word in the Old Testament lesson, who is God’s messenger and word in the New Testament lesson? Jesus, right? Yes, that was an easy question.

And who was Jonah speaking to? Difficult and dangerous people who were not inclined to hear him. And how does that compare with who Jesus was speaking to? Hmm. Also difficult and dangerous people — many of whom were not inclined to hear Him.

We get the sense that Jesus has a job to do that is pretty similar to the one Jonah did. Jesus did something we do not see Jonah doing, though. Jesus called upon others to share in His work. We call them the disciples. And we name them James and John, Andrew and Peter, and the rest.

However, in all that I say from here on, when I mention “disciples,” I mean **us** — the followers of Jesus today. So please insert your name when I mention the disciples.

Jesus calls the disciples. Jesus calls us.

Jesus calls them to what seems like an impossible task: changing people’s hearts and minds.

Jesus handpicks His disciples, who, before that time, do not have any notion or inclination to do the hard work of reaching people for God. In fact, if you had asked the disciples when they awakened that morning, “Do you know that you are going to start changing the whole world today?”, they would have laughed you out of the room. But that is what was happening when Jesus asked for their help.

“Follow Me,” Jesus said. And they did. It is always amazing to me that disciples with well-established lives and vocations would have set all that aside without asking for any of the particulars, like, “Where? For how long? What should we pack? What should we wear? What is our forwarding address?” So many questions that went unasked.

All because Jesus followed up His invitation with those other words, **“And I will make you fish for people.”**

Hmm. That is intriguing, at the very least. Jesus was asking the disciples to use their skills, talents, gifts, wisdom, and words, that were as familiar to them as the back of their hands, for a new and different purpose: fish for people.

That is the disciples' calling. If they were putting two and two together, they might have said back to Jesus, "Catching people! That is a whole lot harder than catching fish. It is like you are asking us to walk into the homes and hearts of people who are not at all like us, who aren't expecting us, who don't even want us, and to draw them into a net — a network, a framework, a new reality — in which Your will prevails, and their old riotous freedoms are curtailed.

Exactly.

And still Jesus asks. And still disciples are called — for the joy, but also the cost, of discipleship.

I know that there are places in your immediate world that need disciples like you. Remember, whenever I say the word disciple, I mean you.

- Disciples are needed to speak to frightening people.
- Disciples are needed to reach frightened people.
- Disciples are needed to speak God's truth.
- Disciples are needed to prevail over wrongheaded notions and falsehood.
- Disciples are needed to demonstrate God's love as we find it in Jesus Christ.
- Disciples are needed to end hatred.
- Disciples are needed to help people find their way, especially people who wrongly believe they are not lost.

I am absolutely sure that you have found yourselves in some places, in some conversations with people you know (since the assault on the Capitol two weeks ago), where you have bit your tongue, you have not spoken God's truth, you have not reached out, you have allowed wrongheaded notions to go unchecked and uncorrected; where you have shirked off the work of a disciple of Jesus Christ because it was too hard or too unlikely to succeed — or, if it did, you did not want those folks to not get what they deserved.

Here is the thing: Jesus is still saying to disciples, ***"Follow Me. Follow Me to these places."***

What would have happened to those New Testament disciples if they had not followed Jesus? I can see it now. So can you.

They would have labored and toiled in the sun and storms until they were too old and tired to do so. They would have eked out a living, and fed their families, but had no lasting impact on their place and time. Their obituaries would have been brief. Their impact would have been slight — no more than a pebble skipped across the Sea of Galilee. Their names would have been long forgotten, as soon as the last living person who knew them had also died. More importantly, had they not followed Jesus, think of the people who would never even know that God cared enough for them that He sent His "A Team" to help them.

If Jonah had not gone fishing in Nineveh, then those Ninevites would have been utterly destroyed. And if disciples, from the day of Jesus down to today, had not gone fishing for people, ditto.

Disciples have a huge and sometimes onerous duty to represent Christ wherever they are, and wherever Christ calls them. When one is a Christian, when one is a Presbyterian, when one is a Shadyside Presbyterian — whether, member, visitor, friend, or staff member — that is your calling, too.

So make a new resolve to represent Christ where you are, and where Christ calls you to go, whether it is all the way to a warlike capital city, or just the other side of your boat. Amen.