

“Fish Tales”

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

We have a couple of fish tales today. One of them is about small lake fish, sardines, carp (although carp can actually get pretty big – where we lived previously they were known as “Iowa salmon”), fish that people would catch with nets and sell in the market place, ending up eventually on someone’s dinner table. The fishermen who made a living catching these fish are part of this first story, and they have familiar names: Peter and Andrew, James and John. We’ll come back to that.

The other story is about one very large salt-water fish that doesn’t end up on someone’s dinner table, but instead, makes a dinner out of someone named Jonah. (You may have heard that this fish was actually a whale, but in the text it doesn’t say that.)

These two stories, one from the Gospel of Mark and the other from the book of Jonah, have something else in common, besides fish. They are both what are known as “call” stories. A call story is one in which God speaks to someone and says to that person: “I’ve got a job for you to do.” It is what the late Senate Chaplain Peter Marshall called, “a tap on the shoulder.” So God tapped Abraham on the shoulder one day and told him to leave his home and go somewhere else. God tapped Moses and told him that his days of herding sheep were over, that from now on he would be herding Israelites. And so on.

So today we have two call stories and in both stories at least part of the action takes place on the sea shore. In the first it is Jesus who strolls along the shore of Lake Galilee, taking in the sights and sounds, watching the fishermen hauling their catch ashore, mending their nets. And then, suddenly, out of the blue, he calls to a couple of them and says, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And just like that the two fishermen leave their nets behind and follow him. And then a little further down the shoreline he sees two more fishermen, says the same thing, and they follow him.

I know I have made reference to him too many times already, but whenever I think about this subject I always think of the story of the Hobbit, Bilbo Baggins in J.R.R. Tolkien’s, *The Lord of the Rings*. Bilbo comes from a good family, the Bagginses, who were well thought of in the neighborhood because “they never had any adventures or did anything unexpected.” But all of that changed one fine spring morning when the sun was shining brightly and Bilbo was visited by an old man carrying a staff, and wearing a tall, pointed blue hat and a long gray coat -- Gandalf, the wizard. And somehow (Bilbo could never quite recall how) this wizard enticed him into leaving his comfortable hobbit hole and joining a company of dwarfs who were off on a grand adventure to fight dragons and search for lost treasure. And so the story begins of the adventures of Bilbo Baggins who very often along the way has occasion to wish that he were back in his hobbit hole in his favorite chair by his own warm fireside with his lamp shining.

And it’s not hard to imagine that Peter and Andrew and James and John also very often along the way had occasion to wish that they were back in their fishing boats, mending their fishing nets after being enticed by this other wizard-like person, Jesus of Nazareth. But on that day when Jesus came along and called to them, they didn’t hesitate. At least as Mark tells it, “immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

In the other story, the one with the very large fish, things did not go that smoothly. If you recall the story, God speaks to Jonah and tells him to go to Nineveh and to “cry out against it.” Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, the despised and perennial enemies of Israel.

It would be like God asking someone to go be a missionary to Al Qaeda. He really wasn't interested.

Jonah's response was: "Who me? Go to Nineveh, that pit of vipers, the seat of the Evil Empire? I don't think so!" So unlike Peter and Andrew and James and John who immediately left their boats and followed Jesus, Jonah immediately booked passage on a ship that would take him in the opposite direction and as far away as he could get from Nineveh.

You probably remember the rest of the story, the storm, the sailors praying and throwing cargo overboard, Jonah taking a nap down in the hold. The captain goes down and awakens Jonah, telling him that the ship is sinking and that he should pray like he never prayed before, to the God of his choice, that they might be spared. And there was, as they say, a whole lot of praying going on. A lot of "fox hole prayers," a lot of wild promises being made about how things would be different if they lived through this storm.

After a while it became clear that it was not helping. If anything, the waves were getting bigger. The superstitious sailors decided it was time to take action on their own. So in a time-honored tradition they cast lots, or drew straws to find out which of them the gods must be angry with. And of course it is Jonah who comes up with the short straw. Jonah admits that he is the guilty party. "What should we do with you?" they ask. He tells them to toss him over the side. They are reluctant to do that but eventually they do, and immediately the seas become calm. There were a couple of times when our family was out on a boat in rough weather when my brother thought we should try that with me.

And of course, it is the next part of the story that has made Jonah famous. It is the fish. Without the fish he would be even more of a minor prophet than he is. The writer says that: "the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." Anyone who has ever gutted and cleaned a fish will have an appreciation for how truly unpleasant that would have been. After three days, as someone has put it so succinctly, Jonah suddenly bursts into song, the fish gets sick and throws him up onto shore. Or the way the writer puts it is that: "...the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land." Jonah was probably the only prophet thus to be spewed.

And now we come to our reading for today where God a second time tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, and this time he does. But whereas most of the Old Testament prophets are pretty long winded, "thus saith the Lord this" and "thus saith the Lord that," Jonah didn't have much to say at all. He walked into the town square, got up on the soap box, waited till a small crowd gathered and then said: "Forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown." In Hebrew it is a total of five words altogether. And the curious thing is that this is not the typical prophetic message at all. It is not a call for repentance: "turn from your wicked ways, and God may spare you." As a matter of fact, God isn't mentioned at all. As far as the Ninevites are concerned, Jonah could have been a seismologist warning of an impending earthquake.

Yet, despite his terse message, and despite his personal preference that God would destroy the city, it doesn't turn out that way. Instead, something amazing happens. The people take his message seriously, repent, proclaim a fast, and put on sackcloth, a symbol of mourning. And the text says that God changes his mind and decides not to destroy the city. Nineveh is spared.

Then comes a part of the story of Jonah unfamiliar to many, in which Jonah becomes dejected, angry, sulking, and depressed to the point of suicide. "Isn't that exactly what I thought would

happen?" he says to God. "I knew you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." In other words, this is what he feared all along, that if he did as God asked, God might spare these people of Nineveh, his mortal enemies. That is not what he wanted to happen. He wanted to see them destroyed.

And then there is a very moving and tender speech at the end when God speaks to his prophet Jonah, very patiently, and says this to him: "...should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

That is the story of Jonah. If some parts of that story make you smile or laugh, I think that is fine. There have even been comedy routines based upon this story, and I think there is a good reason for that. The story may have been meant, as one resource suggested, as "serious comedy." There are certainly many comical aspects to it. But at the same time, there is a serious message. It is about how we think about people who are different from us, or people who may be regarded as our enemies, the other.

Israel was a nation that considered itself chosen and blessed by God. And it felt justified in desiring the destruction of its enemies. But here, in its own literature, is a voice that speaks for compassion with regard to enemies. It carries a powerful message.

The story also illustrates how sometimes those who aren't supposed to know any better reflect more of the love and mercy of God than the ones who are supposed to do that. Those crusty sailors on the ship, they are the ones who show compassion with their reluctance to throw Jonah overboard even though their lives are in danger. Likewise the people of Nineveh respond to the message God sends, in contrast to Jonah who tries to run away from it.

OK. So what does all of this have to do with you and me on a cold, sunny January morning? One thing that impresses me about both stories is the call. The Gospel lesson shows that the call comes to ordinary people. Jesus walks along the shore and calls fishermen to follow him. And what the story of Jonah illustrates is that even if we ignore the call or run away from it, the call does not expire. The call is still there. It comes a second time to Jonah. I think it's safe to say that we have all had missed opportunities in our lives, times when we look back and we could have done something for someone, and we didn't. But we get another chance. The call is still there. What opportunities await us this day, this week? What is incumbent upon us to do for others this week?

But then there is something else that we should take note of, and that is the message of compassion for enemies. The Hebrew Scriptures are full of stories about the enemies of Israel being destroyed, wiped off the map. These stories are full of vindictiveness and retribution. And yet here is a different theme, contained in the same Scriptures, that of compassion for enemies. The writer has told the story in such a way that we can laugh at it, but the truth contained in the story is a serious one.

We have a brand new President and a new administration and from what they are saying it sounds like there is going to be more of an emphasis upon diplomacy instead of military solutions. If they really mean that, it sounds like a good thing to me. It would be a good thing if modern day Israel and Hamas could find a way to negotiate, if both sides could find some compassion for their enemies. There was no sign of any compassion in this latest round of violence.

Could we hope for a world more like the one described in the book of Jonah, where instead of judgment, there is mercy, where instead of death and destruction, there is life? I hope so. Wouldn't that be a great thing?