

"Fish Stories" – January 25, 2015

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

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When I think of fish stories, one image comes to mind – summer trips up to Phillips and going fishing with my grandfather. I have only one fish story. Oh to be sure, I caught lots of little sunfish on our nightly excursions out on the lake in the boat. But those aren't the kind of fish that one tells stories about. No, a really good fish story either centers on that prize catch or the one that got away.

I still remember catching that muskie. If you don't know, muskies are a true prize – the king of fish. Funny thing was, I wasn't even trying. I was down on the dock, about 8 years old, and I cast my line out into the water. It was bad cast and only went a few yards in front of the pier. I struggled with trying to reel it back in, and it felt like it got caught on something – an underwater log, perhaps, or maybe a lily pad. I yanked really hard and the line came free. As I started to reel it in, my 13 year old brother shouted, "You caught a fish!"

In my surprise, I threw down my pole, fish still attached, and ran up the hill, through the woods, screaming my head off. Rule number one, never scream while out in the woods. It makes your parents and grandparents think a bear is after you. They all came barreling out the house expecting the worst, and I just kept yelling "Fish! I caught a fish!" It really didn't take much to excite me in those days.

After a scolding from the adult female members of my family, my grandfather got a curious gleam in his eye, and began to head down to the lake, the rest of us following behind. It took him but a moment to identify my muskie. It wasn't much to look at, only about 10 inches long – way too short to keep – about 20 inches too short - but with all my yanking, the hook tore up his mouth pretty bad and he wasn't long for this world. I got to keep him. For the rest of my trip, I had the privilege of sharing my fish story with all who would listen – the people at the meat market, the folks at the grocery store and the diner, random people on the street. I had caught my first muskie. A worthy fish story. And as a side note, that was that was the only muskie I ever did catch.

The Bible has a few of its own fish stories and today we're going to look at two of them. At first glance they don't seem to have much in common other than the theme of fish, but if we look a little deeper, there's actually more to be discovered.

Our Old Testament Lesson this morning comes from the Book of Jonah. When you first think of the character Jonah, your mind may immediately jump back to lessons of your days in Sunday school, where you first learned of that famous man who was swallowed by a whale and survived in its belly for three whole days. What we often forget is why it happened. So let me catch you up.

Jonah was a prophet. A very reluctant prophet. God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh, a corrupt Gentile city, and tell the people that God was getting pretty fed up with them. Their wickedness was too much for God to stand any longer. Jonah, however, did not take this special mission to heart.

Instead he decided to head for the hills...or, well, in this case, head for the sea. He fled to Joppa and then hopped aboard a vessel headed for Tarshish.

Running away from God probably wasn't the smartest thing Jonah ever did. A violent storm came upon the boat and the sailors began to panic. They began praying to their various gods. Early on, Jonah had told them that he was fleeing from his God and he believed that the storm was probably his fault. He told the sailors to throw him overboard, and after some consideration they obliged. And at that moment, the storm ceased. Next, Jonah was swallowed by a large fish, something like a whale. For three days, Jonah prayed to God from the whale's belly, and finally God instructed the whale to spit Jonah out onto dry land.

After this strange ordeal, God again told Jonah to go to Nineveh, and this time he went. So Jonah brought to them the message that God was ticked off and would overthrow their city in forty days. Surprisingly to Jonah, the king of Nineveh and his people, not only heard the message of God, they decided to do something about it. As a nation they decided to fast and repent of their wrongdoing. They immediately chose to change their ways. God saw their change and decided not to destroy them after all.

God was pleased by their repentance, but Jonah was not. He thought God should still destroy the city. He thought that God was letting them off the hook too easily. Jonah was pretty miffed that God didn't follow through on the threat, and so he went outside the city and sulked for a while. God scolded Jonah for his bad attitude and lack of compassion for the people of Nineveh.

Contrasting this story, we have the lesson from Mark's gospel. This is the call story of the first disciples, Simon and Andrew and James and John. According to Mark, these men did not hesitate when Jesus called them. Jesus came by and called out to them. The men immediately dropped their fishing nets and left their boats to follow after Jesus.

More than likely, it probably didn't happen exactly as Mark writes it. More than likely, the men didn't just walk off, dropping their nets on the shoreline, leaving their families and coworkers to gape in stunned amazement. There were probably a few arrangements to make, things to do at home, the typical tasks one does before embarking on something new. But Mark is trying to make a point here in his Gospel. This wasn't just any journey they were headed off on – this was something incredibly important. This was something big. And so Mark portrayed this scene with intense urgency. These men made a huge change in their lives, and Mark tells about it in a vivid way. I wonder, in our own lives, how often do we simply drop everything and follow when God calls us?

I imagine that we tend to be a bit more like Jonah when it comes to our response to God's call, and less like James and John, and Simon and Andrew. Like Jonah we are slow to act and reluctant to do what God says. We gripe and moan and drag our feet. Like whiney children who don't want to do their chores when mom and dad tell them to. And then there are the times when we get annoyed when God doesn't do what we think God should do.

It's easy for us to come up with excuses for why we can't do it "right now." We can think of a million other things that we think need to be done. Or we want to do it our own way, not God's way. Very often the plans that God has for us have little to do with the plans we have for our own lives. Many times they're inconvenient. It isn't what we had planned, it's not the way we expected things to turn out, or it's not the path we thought we would take. Sometimes, just like Jonah, we simply don't want to do it.

Not only was Jonah reluctant to do what God had asked of him, but he was actually upset with God that God was willing to give the people of Nineveh a second chance. God showed grace, and that annoyed Jonah. He wanted to see the people of Nineveh get what they deserved. He wanted God to destroy them, not show them mercy!

In Jonah's eyes, they didn't deserve to be saved. Sometimes I wonder if we don't feel the same way? How often do we mistakenly think that we have a monopoly on God's grace? That God shouldn't show mercy to those people who look differently or think differently or act differently or sin differently than we do. Don't we sometimes too try to decide who is worth saving and who isn't?

Barriers of race, gender, religion, political tendencies, sexual preferences – all these differences between us and them. "Those" people. The ones who apparently have a completely different way of perceiving the world than we do. Sometimes we get stingy with God's grace. As Episcopal priest Kathleen Wakefield stated, "We may find Jonah amusing, ridiculous, or appalling as he mutters and whines against God's offer of redemption to the Ninevites, and as he tries to run away from God. But if we let the story touch us, if we plumb the depths of our own hearts, we will find Jonah there within us -- that part of us that judges and condemns, that desires revenge rather than justice, vengeance instead of mercy."

Our friend Jonah spent three long days inside the belly of the whale. In that 72 hours of darkness he had time to think and maybe learn a lesson or two. Like Jonah, we spend a fair amount of time in the darkness. Feelings of vengeance eat away at us. Old wounds fester. Hurt feelings keep us isolated. Unresolved anger weighs us down. Sometimes we can carry these negative feelings for years on end.

The psychiatric community tells us that it is we who suffer the most from these unresolved issues. Generally it doesn't even impact the person toward whom we hold them. In Jonah's case, the Ninevites were not affected by Jonah's reluctance or bad feelings, only Jonah was. But when we refuse to let go of these feelings, we become damaged – spiritually, relationally, emotionally, and even physically damaged. It is we who choose to remain in darkness. It is we who stay holed up in the belly of the whale. Like Jonah, who sat alone on the outskirts of Nineveh, pouting and angry, we separate ourselves from God and from others.

But it doesn't have to be this way. We can choose to let go of our issues and move on. Just like with Jonah, God is willing and ready to offer us love and mercy. God's love and mercy is what can heal us

and help us to leave the darkness in which we have chosen to reside. Obviously it does not change the fact that we were indeed hurt. It doesn't mean that our anger was wrong. But it does help us to move beyond the hurt and anger into another place, a place of healing and a place of wholeness. A new place where we can finally move on.

Perhaps that is what those four fisherman saw when they saw Jesus that day by the seashore. Maybe Simon and Andrew saw in him a way to move from the things of the world that kept them stuck in darkness. Maybe James and John could sense in Jesus an overwhelming feeling of acceptance, love and mercy. They lived in a community that was under the power of Rome. They were an occupied nation. They understood having feelings of bitter resentment toward things they could not change. They were the ones who were downtrodden. When Jesus came walking by and gave them a call, perhaps they sensed in him a new way of life. A freedom to live in a different way, outside the darkness of the world, outside the belly of the whale.

When we judge and condemn others, I wonder if that is less a commentary on how we feel about those who are different than we, and more an explanation of how undeserving we ourselves feel? You've heard it said, bullies pick on people who are weaker than they because it makes them feel stronger. So when we judge and condemn others, maybe it's because we ourselves don't feel deserving of God's love and grace and mercy. We rationalize, if we can't get it, no one deserves to get it.

When we get stuck in the belly of the whale, down in the smelly darkness, downtrodden, imprisoned by our issues, less than whole, and going through the motions of living as a lifeless shell, we are desperately in need of what God offers to us in Jesus Christ. When Jesus comes to us on the seashore, as we're standing there mending our nets, caught up in the ordinariness of daily life, how quickly will we be willing to drop the nets when he says, "Come on, follow me. I've got something better for you." Do a myriad of excuses come flooding from our lips? Or do we actually open ourselves to the possibility that maybe he's telling the truth. That by following him, things will be different, and we will experience grace, mercy and healing.

He promises to make us fishers of humans. Imagine if we really accepted that call. If we decided to follow him, and accept his offer of love and mercy for ourselves. That's the first step. And then what if we went out, dropped our defenses, and removed the barriers between us and those different from us. And then what if we offered that love and mercy to all those around us.

If we actually answered that call of Christ, to follow him in discipleship, imagine how much healing we could offer to this broken world around us? When we allow the grace of God to enter into our lives and heal us from our own hurts, we can become whole persons. And as whole persons we will be better equipped to reach out in love, mercy and generosity to other people. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves, maybe we need to ask first, do we actually love ourselves? That's something for each of us to consider.