



“Fish Tales”

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Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***The Third Sunday after Epiphany
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Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20 (NRSV)***

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

Today’s scripture readings are drawn from two of the great fish tales found in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. The first reading is from an epic about a reluctant prophet sent by God on a fool’s errand. Jonah was to go Nineveh and tell the inhabitants to repent or be destroyed by God’s wrath.

In theological terms, the word “repent” means to “turn around,” “to turn around,” or “to be completely changed.”

It’s important to note that Nineveh wasn’t just any city in the Ancient Near East. It was the capital city of Assyria, the nation that colonized Israel, so it was in effect the royal seat of Israel’s arch enemy.

Jonah had significant misgivings about his calling to be a prophet, and resisted his calling so much that God sent a whale to persuade him to accept.

The captain and crew aboard the ship on which he was traveling to Tarsus were so threatened by the whale that they challenged Jonah to a game of dice, in order to determine who the cause of their calamity was. The dice was thrown. Jonah lost, and the crew tossed him into the sea.

Jonah was immediately swallowed by the whale, which swam to the shores of Nineveh and spewed him out on the sand.

Finally convinced of his calling, the prophet proceeded to the gates of Nineveh, and called the city to repentance. The king was humbled. He ordered the citizens to repent, and they did. Nineveh was saved, and the curtain falls with Jonah stamping his feet in fury, because God has been gracious with Israel’s enemies, the Assyrians.

Like the Old Testament reading for today, the gospel reading is another fish tale set among seafaring people. In the case of the gospel, this narrative is set alongside the

Sea of Galilee, in the heart of ancient Palestine, whereas the story of Jonah is set on Israel's Mediterranean shoreline.

Mark describes how Jesus called his first disciples to leave their boats and nets, follow him, and fish for people. In an equally dramatic but different way, Jesus (like Jonah) called his followers to the radical change of embracing a new vocation.

Let us prepare our hearts and minds for the scripture reading by singing together verse two of "Open My Eyes," which is printed in your bulletin.

MUSICAL MEDITATION "Open My Eyes, That I May See" (v. 2)¹

Scott

*O-pen my ears, that I may hear, voic-es of truth thou
Send-est clear; and while the wave-notes fall on my ear,
Ev-ery-thing false will dis-ap-pear.
Si-lent-ly now I wait for thee, read-y, my God, thy will to see.
O-pen my ears, il-lumine me, Spir-it di-vine!*

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Lisa Pemberton

Old Testament

"Jonah converts Nineveh"

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth....When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Gospel

"Jesus calls his first disciples"

Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

¹ Text and Tune: Clara H. Scott. Public domain.

The sign in the hardware store window read, “Gone fishing.” The proprietor did not indicate where, when, or for how long he would be away. He merely posted the sign, and left his customers to fend for themselves.

Fishing notices like these were rare in my hometown, and this one was particularly disappointing to my father, who only went to town with a particular need in mind and who knew that he would have to drive another 10 miles to find a store where he could buy shingling nails.

Suffice it to say, we did not get any shingle nails that day, nor did we finish shingling the porch roof until the following week. Rather than drive to the next town for supplies, my father decided that we would go home and start a different project.

At church the following Sunday, my father learned from friends at the Men’s Sunday School class that the store owner would be back that following week, so we went back to town a few days later and picked up the nails.

Part of the sales chatter between my dad and the owner included the owner telling stories about his fishing trip—stories which were augmented by a couple of photographs posted on the wall, and a sample of the lure used to catch “the big one” in the pictures.

My father wasn’t particularly impressed with the owner’s fish stories. I, on the other hand, was completely enthralled. The colorful, toothy, fighters in the photographs seemed almost as long as I was tall at the age of five or six. They clearly were not the type of fish one could catch in the Raccoon River or Little Clear Lake near our farm.

These fish, my father explained, were “muskies” from Lake Superior—where real fisherpersons went to fish—far from the landlocked prairie state where we were lived.

The hardware store owner didn’t go into a lot of details about his expedition, but he didn’t need to. The pictures alone captured the essence of the adventure, and like most good fish tales, these stories left a lot to the imagination. They also omitted elements that might detract from the prowess of the protagonist, or diminish the dramatic climax to an otherwise humdrum fishing expedition.

III

I am reminded, when reflecting on these fishing stories from my childhood, that good fish tales take license. They embellish truth. They inflate the reputation of the fisherpersons, and cause listeners to wish that they had been there in the boat or at the shore. But then again, if they had, the events described by the teller would not likely have been as impressive in real-time as they had been in story-time.

We accept that the primary purpose of fish tales in our culture is to inflate the size, strength, and fight of the fish, in ways that extol the virtues of the fisherperson and improve the quality of the story.

The same could be said of fish tales in the Bible, with one difference: In the biblical fish tales, the hero is not the fisherperson, but God, and the purpose of the story is to reveal more about God and God's qualities than about the fish and the fisherpersons.

James Ackerman, professor of religious studies at Indiana University, explains in an introduction that he wrote on the book of Jonah that this Old Testament tale reveals the magnitude of God's grace and the theological conundrum that God's magnanimity presents for believers—particularly in relation to our enemies.²

Jonah was a reluctant prophet sent to Nineveh to preach a message of repentance. His first reaction to the call was negative. He said with all his heart and soul, "No thanks, God. I'm not interested in the job. Pick someone else." Then he set sail for Tarsus.

In route to the Turkish capital, Jonah's ship was nearly capsized by a whale. The ship's captain and crew tossed the prophet into the sea, where he was swallowed by the whale and ultimately spewed out on the shore of Nineveh, where we find him in today's Old Testament story.

Here Jonah begins his doom and gloom prophecy saying: "In forty days, your city and nation are going to fall."

The climax builds as the Assyrian king and the Ninevites heed Jonah's prophecy by proclaiming a national fast and ordering all inhabitants to don sackcloth and ashes as a sign of repentance.

As if the Ninevites' humility was not enough of a shocker, the *pièce de résistance* in the story of Jonah is that God had a change of heart and spared the Ninevites. The curtain drops with Jonah stamping his feet, furious that God's grace has been extended to Israel's enemies.

IV

Of all the prophets in the Bible, it seems that Jonah is among the most human. He is reluctant to serve. He runs from assignments, and is scandalized by God's grace.

In Jonah's perfect world, God picks someone else to go to Nineveh. God finds someone else to speak truth to power. And God puts an embargo on grace.

² James S. Ackerman, "Introduction to Jonah," in *The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 1374-1375.

By the prophet's own account, though, God is quite different than Jonah expects. God is not the theological equivalent of an NCAA Division I basketball scout, who is only interested in drafting the top 1% of all Christians for his team.

God is not some wilting lily who takes no for an answer, or some stingy arbiter of grace who is only concerned for a few of us. No, the God we worship is passionate and persistent. The God we worship calls us just as we are, loves us regardless of our past, and offers us (and all people) grace beyond our wildest imaginations.

To fully embrace our callings, God invites us to repent—which means to turn—from any personal sense of inadequacy and to use the gifts that God has imbued us with. To fully embrace our callings, God invites us to repent—to turn—from the fears that have bound us and embrace the hope that God would instill in our hearts. To fulfill our callings, we must repent—we must turn—from all worldly ideologies that deny that we or others are beyond the realm of God's grace and compassion.

These are our challenges. No, these are the opportunities inherent in God's invitation to us to be fishers of people. As we dare to pursue these opportunities, we discover not merely what we are made of—but what God is made of—and what we were destined to become on the day of our birth. Thanks be to God. Amen.