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"The Call"

Jonah 3:1-5; 10 Mark 1:14-20 John 1:43-51

INTRODUCTION TO JONAH 3:1-5; 10

God called Jonah to go preach repentance to Nineveh, the capital city of the land we now know as Iraq. Can you imagine a Jew preaching repentance to Iraqis today? Jonah said, "Here I Am Lord, Send someone else. Cause Here I GO."

The story goes that Jonah booked passage on a ship to Spain, roughly the opposite direction. A storm came up and Jonah was thrown overboard to quiet it but was swallowed by a big, a Really BIG FISH. It seems Jonah first needed to repent before he could call others to repent. Jonah did repent and prayed and repented and prayed for 3 days. After 3 days of swimming the Big Fish made it to shore and spit up Jonah. (If it took a fish 3 days to make it to shore, Jonah would have never made it).

Jonah went to Nineveh to do what he was called to do in the first place, which for me perfectly illustrates the Reformed Doctrine of predestination. Jonah was destined to preach repentance to Nineveh, Jonah exercised his free will. Jonah experienced the consequences of his disobedience to his calling. Jonah fulfilled his calling. Jonah preached to Nineveh. Hear the word of the Lord from Jonah 3:1-5 and verse 10.

INTRODUCTION TO MARK 1:14-20

The BIG FISH that taxied Jonah to shore actually was a "fisher of men." He was a fish that caught a man. Our gospel lesson is about Jesus calling to some men who caught fish for a living to leave that and follow him to start catching people. Hear the word of the Lord from Mark 1:14-20

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 1:43-51

Long before there was doubting Thomas there was Skeptical Nathaniel. In this morning's other gospel lesson Philip comes to his friend Nathaniel and tells him he has found the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Nathaniel says Nazareth? Can any good come out of Nazareth? Hear the word of the Lord from John 1:43-51

Let's pray, Lord thank you for coming to their lakeshore. Thank you for reaching out to Philip so Philip could reach out to Nathaniel. Thank you for calling these first followers. Thank you for inspiring some of those first followers like Philip to call subsequent followers like Nathaniel. Thank you for the message that it sent to the people that everyone is valued in God's eyes. Thank you for coming after us...and calling us to follow you too. Help us to follow closely. Help us in our reaching out to be the way you call others to follow as well. In Jesus 'name we pray. Amen.

Personally, I'm thankful that my calling to follow Jesus didn't require previous expertise at catching fish. I've only once had the opportunity to go somewhere and try to catch fish. I was about 10 years old and I caught a perch the size of my 10 year old hand. I

don't much like eating fish. I think it was the fish sticks my mom fed me as a kid. Where do they catch those? They were more an excuse to eat catsup kind of like eating rubber shrimp is an excuse for eating remoulade sauce.

The gospel lessons for today tell the story of the calling of the very first 6 followers of Jesus. Jesus just walked up to Simon and Andrew, James and John while they were on the job and said, "Follow me and I'll make you fishers of men." Jesus went to Simon and Andrew's home town and walked up to Philip and said "Follow me." (Philip wasn't a fisherman so Jesus left off the part about becoming a fisher of men. But Philip was the first to reach out to someone who hadn't yet met Jesus in person.

They weren't in worship. They weren't at some spiritual retreat. They were at work. Jesus' call to follow can happen anywhere. In fact, as we will see, for Jesus almost NEVER called anyone to follow him in a place of worship. The one time he spoke in a service of worship a demon possessed man yelled at him and after the service was over the congregation tried to throw him off a cliff!

What did Jesus call these fishermen to do? He said, "Follow me." Tag along. "Hang" with me. Perhaps there is a lesson there in how folks become disciples. They do it by just being around Jesus, or for us now, being around followers of Jesus. It involves picking up on the things that Jesus thought were important. They do it by seeing what Jesus cared about...and what he got upset about. They do it by learning what his priorities are.

The fishermen Jesus called to follow him didn't fish the same way many folks do today. They didn't bait hooks and cast them out and wait for the fish to come to them. They went after the fish. They fished with large nets. If they were fishing from the shore, they would cast their nets out as far as they could throw them, covering as broad an area as they could with each cast. Then they would slowly pull the net back to shore, trapping fish in the net as it came back in. When they fished from boats they used the same method.

They were not unaware of line fishing though. There is one story when some opponents of Jesus were challenging him because he wasn't paying his taxes to the temple. Jesus told Peter to go to the lake and cast a line. When he did Peter caught one fish. He opened the fish's mouth and pulled out a coin. The coin was the exact amount that Jesus needed to pay his tax. He made Peter a fisher of funds!

When we think about line fishing, catching one at a time, I think there are some principles that can apply to people catching.

1. For example, you cannot catch any fish if there are none to be caught. Unfortunately, that IS the excuse many folks use for not being "people catchers." They say they do not know anyone who is not already "caught," already a part of Christ's church. They say, "All my friends are already Christians." Actually, in reality about HALF the folks you know are effectively Underchurched or UNchurched. They may have their name on a church roll somewhere, but they have not been to church for at least six months for

anything other than a wedding, a funeral or a Christmas or Easter. They're Poinsettia and Lily people. I guess the analogy might be that these are fish that have jumped out of the boat and need to be "caught" again.

2. Another basic is it helps to know when the fish are biting. During warmer months, some TV weathercasters even give the best times of the day for anglers to be out on the water. One of the best opportunities for people catching is at a moment of transition--perhaps a birth or a death, new home, new job, or a lost job.

3. Dedicated fishers are ever watchful and sensitive to change - they watch the currents in the water, sniff the air for moisture, are aware of changes in weather as lows and highs invade the atmosphere. They watch the terrain under the boat looking for a habitat that might contain fish. And if one lure doesn't work they CHANGE! No one goes fishing with a tackle box full of identical lures. When the circumstances change they go deeper in the water. They switch lures when the light intensity in the water changes or when they are in clear water versus darker water. (6)

4. Another basic is bait. You have to know what kind of bait to use to catch the people you want to catch. You have to use more than one kind of bait! There are salt water people and fresh water people out there! You have to have something to attract the fish. To expect the fish to just jump in the boat for no reason will not work.

In the same way, successful "people catchers" will offer something to attract people. For example, an invitation to "Come to church with me sometime" rarely works. It is too easy to say "Sure" to that and never give it another thought. Instead, invite your friend to something particular: a special event. Would you like to come to our Men's Prayer Breakfast next Saturday? We have Bob Patterson the new moderator of New Covenant Presbytery whose email is yardgeek.com. He is the owner of Southwest Fertilizer. Would you come with me to our next Friends of Faith supper? It's a Super Bowl Party and Lowell Westerman's House. Would you come to church with me this Sunday? Or, would you like to go fishing with me on Saturday? Be creative, but be specific. That way someone must actually make a decision, rather than put you off with a meaningless "Sure."

There is a website called "Back to Church" that quotes a statistic that says that 82% of folks would come to church IF someone asked them. Better than 70%, of people, when asked why they joined a church said it was because someone had asked them. (5)

The concerning statistic is that only 2% of folks ever ask someone to come with them in a given year. So far this year we've had 3 people join. We're down to 97 for our 100th Anniversary by 2022.

5. One final bit of fishing advice--be patient. No one can be successful at fishing without patience. If you give up after a few minutes, a few casts, without any bites or nibbles, you will never catch any fish. It's the same with people catching. You have to keep on casting, keep on extending the invitation, sometimes even changing the bait. Give your efforts time to make an impact.

What was it that Phillip saw in Christ that moved him to follow, that stirred him so to invite his friend Nathanael?

Because of what Jesus said to him Nathanael is shaken. The skeptical Nathaniel is transformed. He says, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel." That wouldn't be the only case. There were more to come. Jesus said, you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You're going to see greater things than that." Jesus was saying Come and see Nathanael. That's all I ask, just come and see, and you will learn that something good can come from Nazareth!

These first disciples embarked on a three year journey of following Jesus. They were watching as people began to place their lives in the hands of Jesus. They listened as Jesus spoke to people in a way that made them understand their lives better than they understood them themselves.

God is calling. God is calling people by name. It may be a reluctant prophet who runs the other way at first like Jonah. It may be a Day Dreamer like Nathaniel.

Once an international gathering of young people met for a full week to discuss how to better share Christ's message with the world. Those assembled for the conference read many informative essays, heard many fine speakers, watched a few videos, and had ample time to discuss with each other. As the conference was beginning to break up and those attending were packing to leave, a young woman from East Africa rose and said, "In my country when we hear that a pagan village is ready to accept the gospel we don't send books, videos, a Bible, or even an evangelist. Rather we send the best Christian family we can find because we have found that the example of a good family speaks louder and more clearly than all the books, speeches, and videos in the world."

For all the allure of fancy church buildings, the charm of the world's greatest preacher who pastors the world's friendliest congregation, pale in comparison to the hand of the person who reaches out to their friend, neighbor, or colleague, even a stranger and says, "Come with me." or in the case of Philip and Nathaniel, "Come and see."

By the way, here is a bit of advice for reluctant people-catchers who are afraid you might be using the wrong bait; in other words, saying the wrong thing. Worry not! Remember Jonah! There was nothing winsome or attractive about his message to Nineveh, but look what happened - the whole city repented. My point is that God can and does use the strangest witnesses to accomplish the kingdom's purpose. Let yourself go - bait the hook, cast the net, reach out - in the name of the one who called those first fishermen on the shores of Galilee.

Jerry Rice was the longtime star for the San Francisco 49ers, considered one of the greatest receivers in the history of football; he played for the 49ers for 15 years, 1985 to 2000. He is a famous athlete and you would think he came from some legendary college team but he didn't. He played for Mississippi Valley State University, in Itta Bena, Mississippi. .

He was once asked, "Why did you attend a small, obscure university like Mississippi Valley State University in Itta Bena, Mississippi?" Rice responded, "Out of all the big-

time schools (such as UCLA) to recruit me, MVSU was the only school to come to my house and give me a personal visit."

The big-time schools recruited through cards, letters, and advertisements, but only one came to meet him and showed Rice personal attention. It makes a difference in this world to meet people eye to eye and invite them to be a part. It is the personal touch which attracts us, is it not? Cards and letters are nice and they're meaningful but they can only do so much. And advertising is so impersonal. But a hand shake or even a "Wave Offering" has a personal touch, it makes all the difference!

A few years ago Richard Cardinal Cushing wrote if all the sleeping folks will Wake UP! and all the lukewarm folks will Fire UP and all the disgruntled folks will Sweeten UP and all the discouraged folks will Cheer UP and all the depressed folks will Look Up, and all the estranged folks will Make Up, and all the gossiping folks will Shut up, and all the dry bones will Shake Up and all the true soldiers will Stand Up, and all the church members will Pray up and if the Savior of all will be Lifted up . . . then we can have the greatest renewal this world has ever known.

That is, of course if we listen for and respond to ...the call.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Dear Lord, you call us to follow. You are known to us amid our dreams and our deliberations. Sleeping or waking we cannot hide from your presence. You are around us and within us; you direct us and watch over us. We give you thanks for your watchful care and gracious provision.

Lord, soften those who resist your truth. Reveal yourself to the skeptics among us, even when they are us. Surprise us with the message of new life. Turn us from making ourselves our only source of value and show us how your mercy can transform.

Surround and nourish the young in faith whose commitment has not been tested. Keep them from trials beyond their capacity to endure, yet help them take risks that will strengthen their resolve to stand firm in Jesus. Build up their confidence through the gift of your Holy Spirit. Enable us in the family of faith to be a source of assurance and support.

We pray for those on our hearts who are in need. Especially we pray for the family of Tucker Coughlin who said goodbye to his wife Marilyn as she joined the church triumphant this week. We pray for those who have lost loved ones, through natural causes, through natural disasters, through disasters caused by man's inhumanity to man--especially when they are done in the name of god. Startle those who have grown complacent--whose commitment to Christ had become just one of many options. Intrude in our lives with the transforming love of Christ and astonish us with the sense of your awesome power. Keep us from seeking comfort above discipleship and make of us faithful witnesses to our world.

(1) A Fish(ing) Story, Scott Bowerman

- (2) People Sharing Jesus, Darrell W. Robinson
- (3) Sermons On The Gospel Readings: Sermons for Sundays in Advent, Christmas, And Epiphany, New Beginnings in Christ, Richard Gribble, CSC, CSS Publishing Company
- (4) Richard Cardinal Cushing.