

Fish Tales
Sermon on Jonah 3:1-5, 10 and Mark 1:14-20 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, January 22, 2005

Although my collection of cardigan sweaters indicates that I dress like Mr. Rogers (and like him, have entered the ministry), he is not my childhood hero. That distinction belongs to another PBS icon, namely Oscar the Grouch, the cranky, foul-tempered green monster who lives in a trashcan on *Sesame Street*. I also had a particular fondness for Waldorf and Statler, the two curmudgeonly old men who offered their withering critiques from the balcony of *The Muppet Show*. And Christmas was not complete if I did not see the meanest, snarling-est, creepiest creature of all, *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*.

To me there is something wonderfully enchanting about these anti-heroes. Each is pessimistic, judgmental, and hard-hearted in his own endearing way, and yet none is beyond redemption. All of this may explain my fundamental sympathy for Jonah, the Bible's most unwittingly successful prophet. If he didn't write the book, *How to Succeed as a Prophet Without Really Trying*, his picture certainly appeared on its cover. But like all good anti-heroes, Jonah didn't set out to succeed, wanted neither to win friends nor influence people. Jonah wanted his audience to be punished—to get exactly what they deserved and more.

“Now the word of the Lord [had come] to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ‘Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me’” (Jonah 1:1-2). Jonah, however, had other ideas as well as good reason not to want to go to Nineveh: It was a wicked and violent city, the capital of Israel's enemy Assyria, a city the prophet Nahum had called a “city of bloodshed” (3:1). If God had business with the Ninevites, Jonah wanted no part of it. Jonah decided that rather than accept God's call, he would head in the opposite direction, and so he went down to Joppa and booked a cruise for Tarshish.

Escaping God proved to be more difficult than Jonah had counted on, however. Before he had time to sign up for the shuffleboard tournament, God caused a great storm to come up and the ship threatened to break up. Realizing he was the cause of God's wrath, Jonah convinced the frightened sailors to throw him overboard, where he hoped to drown in the sea. But God wasn't about to let that happen, and so he caused a great fish to swallow Jonah.

Realizing that he wasn't going to get away from God, Jonah offers an incredible prayer of thanksgiving to God, using a psalm worthy of the *Book of Common Prayer*. After having spent three days and three nights in the belly of this fish, giving him lots of time to think over his call, Jonah was finally thrown up on the beach and began his trek to Nineveh. Once he had arrived in the great city, he immediately got to work, proclaiming the imminent destruction of Nineveh. In Hebrew, his message is all of five words, roughly akin to, "In forty days, Nineveh's toast."

And surprisingly, the message worked. Jonah had not gone any farther than one-third of the way through the city, he had simply threatened its citizens with certain punishment, and *voila*, everybody repented: From the king to the cows, everyone put on sackcloth, mourned, and fasted. When God saw that the Ninevites had repented, God repented, too. God changed his mind. He did not destroy the city like he had promised. And that made Jonah mad.

"See?" said Jonah. "I knew it! I knew that this is exactly what was going to happen. I knew that I was going to come here, threaten these people within an inch of their lives, all for nothing. You can't destroy this city because you are 'a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing' (4:2d). Don't you remember who we're dealing with here? We're dealing with Ninevites, our terrible, horrible, no good, very bad national enemies, and here you go throwing around grace and mercy like there's no tomorrow! I'm so humiliated that you might as well kill me now."

The problem with Jonah's call to ministry is that he knew how the story was going to end. Like the prophets Moses, Elijah, and Jeremiah, Jonah resists his call from God, but he "exceeds them all in his defiance."¹ That Jonah 'fled from the presence of the Lord' "signals not just resistance but outright disobedience," not so much escaping God as rejecting the call. Jonah refuses the call not because there is no hope but precisely because he knows there is hope. Jonah knows that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and ready to relent from punishing, but he is not prepared for others—especially unworthy Ninevites—to share in that grace and mercy. Jonah knows the nature of God all too well; he knows how the story is going to end, and he is unwilling to embrace a future full of the promise of new life.

Simon, Andrew, James, and John respond to the call of God in exactly the opposite way. Jesus encounters these men shortly after the beginning of his public ministry, a ministry that focused on announcing the "good news of God," that the time of God's kingdom was at hand, and calling people to "repent and believe the good news" (Mk. 1:14-15). As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew at work fishing. And he said to them, "'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their [fishing] nets and followed him" (1:17-18). After having gone a little farther, Jesus saw James and John working alongside their father. "Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him" (1:20).

Jesus' call to follow him was as abrupt as it was clear. Nothing had prepared these men for it. The call came when all of them were at work, busy with other tasks, immersed in the dailiness of earning a living and providing for their families. Nothing about the story suggests that the men were unhappy or searching for meaning in their lives or looking for fulfillment. There was nothing to predispose them to answer Jesus' seaside summons.

¹ Phyllis L. Trible, *The Book of Jonah*, New Interpreters Bible, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 480.

Jesus chooses whom he will, and calls whom he chooses. And watching them at their craft that day, Jesus chose four fishermen, calling to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” It is a command accompanied by a promise. The call to “Follow me” is Jesus’ call to a life of discipleship, an invitation to “join him in sharing his life and ministry.”² The promise “I will make you fish for people” is a new word, a word offering entirely different possibilities than Simon, Andrew, James, and John had ever known. Jesus was inviting these men into a “totally unknown future.”³

What, then, accounts for this response? How is it that Jonah resisted, refused, even sought to escape from God’s call because he knew the future, whereas four fishermen immediately accepted the call to a future they could not foresee? Ironically, the different responses are rooted in the same aspect of God’s nature: God is faithful. God is reliable. God fulfills his promises. Of course, Jonah might say the last isn’t true, that in fact God changed his mind. But God did not destroy Nineveh exactly because of God’s faithfulness, a faithfulness Jonah knew and confessed: God was gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and ready to relent from punishing. God is a God who holds open a future if we are ready to seek him and his ways. That is what Simon, Andrew, James, and John must have seen in Jesus: authority, power, sincerity, hope—the possibility for something new and different and fulfilling. Only this can explain their faithful obedience to the call to discipleship, for without discussion or debate, without question or qualm, “they immediately left their nets and followed him.” These men left behind jobs, security, a comfortable way of life, in short everything they had known, all for the uncertain future of following Jesus. But as John Wesley never failed to remind his followers, when God issues a command, his promise follows right behind. The promise is that God’s

² Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 34A (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1989) 51.

³ N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (London: SPCK and Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 8.

power will avail for those of us who answer the call, that God's power working through the presence of the Holy Spirit will be there to enable us to say Yes to God and answer the call.

Friends, today Jesus stands at the lakeshore of our lives, watching us as we go about our work. Today Jesus calls to us, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Today Jesus invites us to a future bright with the promise of something new and different and fulfilling, a call to share in his life and ministry. His promise is to be faithful, to enable our work, to walk with us, and to be for us "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and ready to relent from punishing." Let us then leave our nets and follow him.