

3 Epiphany Year B

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

Fish for People or Abandon Ship!

Let us pray. Lord, you call us to spread your good news of forgiveness and to bring others closer to you. May we not fear your invitation, but trust you enough to extend it to others. AMEN.

The more I thought about the lessons for today, the more I realized that they were about responding to God's call in our lives. In Mark's gospel, the original disciples offer an intimidating example. Jesus calls, ***"Follow me."*** And immediately, they drop their fishing nets and follow.

Very few of us, I'd reckon, would be able to simply pull up stakes and leave our lives at a moment's notice. I had a few seminary friends who left careers behind, one was in law enforcement, another an aerospace engineer at Boeing, but they didn't leave everything behind. Somehow

they convinced their wives and kids to come with them. It seems like in today's complicated world, people are entangled in much more than fishing nets. What entangles you and keeps you from living into the fullness of who God wants you to be?

The disciples are a tough act to follow in that regard, but the lectionary compilers also saw fit to give us Jonah. It's amusing that the part of the story that we see in the lectionary is slanted to make Jonah look like a roaring success.

Jonah cried out: ***"40 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 didn't do it."**

What an amazing triumph for Jonah. Not only did the Ninevites repent, but God changed His mind about destroying them because of what Jonah accomplished. If all we had to go on of the story of Jonah was what we see here, he would be the most successful of prophets. Except for three intriguing words: *“a second time.”* This wasn't the only time God called on Jonah to do him a solid.

In Jonah Chapter 1 verse 1 it says:
*“The word of the LORD came to Jonah...
'Go to that great city of Nineveh and
preach against it, because its wickedness
has come up before me.’*

What did Jonah do then? The first time God called him? Did Jonah say, “Here I am, send me!” Nope. Jonah headed in the opposite direction!

Search your life a bit. Have you ever had a time when you felt like God wanted you to do something and you did just the

opposite? Hmm. I wonder, how did that work out for you? It may even be related to what you are doing with your life right now.

I love Jonah because he isn't so different from many of us. He thinks through what God may be asking of him and he calculates the cost is too high. He's afraid to face up to his country's worst enemies and even worse, he hates the idea that God loves them too and would even consider giving them another chance. So he runs. He hops on a ship going in the opposite direction.

Jonah got on this ship headed for the wrong place and a violent storm threatens the ship and all its passengers and crew. Everyone turns to Jonah to do something because he had told them he was fleeing God and they figured he had done something pretty nasty to get God so ticked off.

Now here is the point at which I realize that most likely this story is not meant to be taken literally. It is a fable, a funny little story intended to teach the hearers a lesson. Jonah suggests that the only way to calm down the sea is to toss him overboard!?! Really, Jonah?!

At first the crew does their best to row ashore and avoid murder, but in the end, they do as Jonah suggested and the sea stopped raging.

So is this the end of Jonah? Is he doomed to be killed by the crashing waves never to fulfill his God-given mission? No—we haven't even gotten to the chapter printed in today's bulletin!

Jonah 1:17: ***“And God provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.”*** While he was inside the fish (I told you this was a fable) he had the chance to ask God for forgiveness and to promise to

follow God's will, even though he wasn't happy about it. The fish spits Jonah out and off he goes for his second chance.

Now I'm pretty sure that the writer of Jonah isn't suggesting that we should expect a giant fish to rescue us when our own choices get us in trouble. However, the story shows us that we can head quite a bit off course in life and God will give us the opportunity to turn around; even when some folks might think that we are beyond the point of no return. Somehow God got Jonah to where he needed to be, in spite of himself.

There are times in life when our detours lead us to our final destinations. I've known of people who have attended spiritual retreats looking for refreshment and end up with a calling to some kind of ministry. The pull of the demand to fish for people was too strong.

Whether you are like the fishermen who leap before they look into fishing for

people, or like Jonah, who resisted with every fiber of his being to the very end, God calls you to follow and to share the Word and can use you to make a difference.

AMEN.