

"Sent Fishing"

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

January 22, 2006

An old-timer sat on the river bank, obviously awaiting a nibble, though the fishing season had not officially opened. A uniformed officer stood behind him quietly for several minutes. "You the game warden?" the old-timer inquired. "Yup." Unruffled, the old man began to move the fishing pole from side to side. Finally, he lifted the line out of the water. Pointing to a minnow wriggling on the end of the line, he said, "Just teaching him how to swim."

I suspect that for almost any activity that a person might engage in there can be great stories to tell. But for some reason it seems as though fishing has become infamous for the stories related to it and how those stories can get a bit out of hand. I don't know what it is about fishin' that brings out the big stories - but it does. I have done enough fishing that I could easily tell some whoppers that might even begin in reality [although they may not end up there]. But then I think of Jonah and I figure that no one could top a fish story like that one.

Imagine it. When Jesus goes about recruiting disciples to call people to faithfulness in God, He tells them he is going to make them fishers of men. But when God wants to send a prophet to do a little fishin' for people in the city of Nineveh and the prophet is reluctant to go, He sends a fish, a big one - to catch the fisherman. — I don't know - but I think God must like fishing. He certainly likes the image.

Jesus walked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and came to a spot where Andrew and Peter were doing a little fishing with their father, Zebedee. It was their profession. Fishing was their bread and butter. They knew fishing - one would have to imagine that they were good at it. But Jesus called them to leave it behind and do some fishin' of another kind. - - - It is not an easy thing to do to leave what you know and pursue a new direction. For Peter and Andrew it would be an experience in which they would encounter failures at times - and at other times they would experience great success in the same way they had experienced both empty and full nets when they had cast them into the Sea of Galilee. - But even if it was going to be a new and perhaps frightening experience, they set down what they knew and turned their backs on it so they could follow where Jesus would lead them. I don't know if they were thinking about Jonah when they responded so immediately. Sometimes I wish God would use more big fish to get us going in the right direction when we fail to follow.

"I will make you fish for people." That is what Jesus told Peter and Andrew. It is often an image that we use to talk about what God calls us all to do. We are all called to reach out with the good news of the Gospel. Perhaps it is unfortunate that we don't use the fishing language more often. It is nice to say 'reach out with good news' - but it seems to be a lot more real when you begin to imaging the fishing images and we can ask things like: 'Do you have a line in the water?' 'Are you just trying to teach that minnow to swim or do you really intend to catch anything?' 'Have you landed any fish lately?'

I ran across a quote by a man named Don Marquis who said; "Our idea of fishing is to leave all the exertion up to the fish. If they are ambitious we will catch them. If they are not, let them go about their business." At a recent conference that I attended at Luther Seminary, one speaker said that Lutherans like to think that they are following this command of Jesus to be fishers of people by putting a Baptismal bowl in the front of the church, fill it with water and then drop a fish hook in the font and wait for a fish to jump in the water.

So, how's the fishing? Caught anything lately? If you are running away from the fishin' hole like Jonah did - the fishin's not so good. But when God got Jonah going in the right direction, the nets were plumb full.

Two men went fishing. One man was an experienced fisherman, the other wasn't. Every time the experienced fisherman caught a big fish, he put it in his ice chest to keep it fresh. Whenever the inexperienced fisherman caught a big fish, he threw it back. The experienced fisherman watched this go on all day and finally got tired of seeing this man waste good fish. "Why do you keep throwing back all the big fish you catch?" he asked.

The inexperienced fisherman replied, "I only have a small frying pan."

So, how's the fishin'? Catching anything? We've got a great frying pan. Nothing needs to be thrown back. Do we have a line in the water? Is it the right kind of hook? Did we remember to put on any bait? Did we decide that the ice was too thick to bother trying to cut through or too thin to go out on it?

"Follow me and I will make you fish for people." This morning, between worship services we will hold our annual meeting of the congregation. We will have some good food and receive reports on the past years fishing. We will have an opportunity to nominate various members of this congregation to specific tasks and vote on a budgets with which to move forward into 2006. The church council will have a retreat early in February in which we will have a better opportunity to talk about the mission that God has laid before this congregation and try to get behind a vision of where God is leading us. At that time we will also have an opportunity to talk about how to get the right fishermen in the right fishin' holes - how to staff for the ministry God calls us to do - how to equip our members with the right bait and get folks out where they can and do put a line in the water. If you have ideas, share them with me or with a member of the church council.

We have great "Good News" - we have a message and a ministry to share. Our Lord Jesus sends us fishing. Grab a pole. Know the right bait. Share the good news with the love of the one who sends us fishing.

AMEN