

“Nets, News, and the Nearness of God’s Reign”

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
January 25, 2009*

Jonah 3:1-4:1, Mark 1:14-20

Our first lesson is from the third chapter of the book of Jonah, continuing into the first verse of the fourth chapter. You may remember at the beginning of the book God tells Jonah to go and call the people of Nineveh to repentance. Nineveh was the capital of ancient Assyria, the country that invaded the Northern Kingdom of Israel. With characteristic Israelite dislike of the Ninevites, and not wanting to offer the people in the hated Assyrian capital an opportunity to avoid punishment, Jonah books passage on a ship heading in the opposite direction of Nineveh - toward Tarshish. According to the outlandish story, on the way Jonah is thrown overboard and swallowed by a big fish. After three days in the belly of the fish, Jonah sings a psalm of thanksgiving, and the fish spits him out onto dry land.

That is where chapter three begins: with God reiterating God’s call to Jonah. Pay attention to how Jonah responds to that call, how the people respond to Jonah’s message, and how Jonah reacts to their response. And as you listen, keep one more thing in mind. Keep in mind that the ruins of Nineveh are found underneath Mosul, in modern day Iraq. *Read Jonah here.*

Our second lesson comes from the first chapter of Mark’s gospel. In the first thirteen verses of Mark, John the Baptist has appeared in the wilderness calling people to prepare the way of the Lord, Jesus has been baptized by John in the Jordan, and Jesus has been driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. Now, a scant thirteen verses into the gospel, Jesus’ public ministry begins. Listen for what precipitates Jesus’ coming to Galilee, note what his message is, and ponder what causes the first disciples to respond to Jesus’ invitation to follow. *Read Mark here.*

“The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news.” With these words, Jesus launches his public ministry in the gospel of Mark. They are the very first words we hear Jesus speak in Mark’s account of Jesus’ life. The words are, one could say, an inaugural address of sorts - the kick-off to Jesus’ ministry, an invitation Jesus issues his hearers in the first century (and the twenty-first) to step into the present and future with God.

Jesus’ address was not first heard by millions crammed into the capital city of a world superpower, while billions more watched on TV. It came first, rather, to a relatively small number of people in the backwater region of a tiny country which was in thrall to the superpower of its day. Galilee was, at first glance, an unlikely place for an inauguration. The region, in the northern part of Israel, had come to be associated with the Gentiles, the outsiders, the people not like the Jews. Galilee was filled with unsophisticated folk like the fishermen who would be the first to respond to Jesus’ call. What an odd place to announce that God’s kingdom had come near, that the God of Israel had ushered in a new era. Why not start in the capital city of Jerusalem? Why not start with the priests, the people who should, ostensibly, know all about the activity of God? Why start in Galilee?

The story of Jonah gives us a couple of clues as to why. First, I think, because it is a story that illustrates the poet Elizabeth Alexander's question in her inaugural poem this week. "*What if the mightiest word is "love" - love beyond marital, filial, national; love that casts a widening pool of light; love with no need to preempt grievance?*" What else is the kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurates about, after all, but a mighty word of love that transcends boundaries and borders, casting an ever-widening pool of light and having no need to preempt grievance?

To usher in that sort of kingdom, you don't start in Jerusalem or on the Mall. You start in Galilee, you start in Nineveh, and you start in Gaza, or South Central L.A., or Southwest D.C. To be part of that sort of kingdom takes realizing that, as the poet put it, "*In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air, anything can be made, any sentence begun. On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp, praise song for walking forward in that light.*" That light is the light of the kingdom of God.

Here is a second reason Jonah's story points to why Jesus kicks off his ministry in Galilee: because it is ordinary people who step forward into that light. In Eugene Peterson's introduction to the book of Jonah in his marvelous rendering of the Bible, The Message, he writes,

"Stories are the most prominent biblical way of helping us see ourselves in "the God story", which always gets around to the story of God making us and saving us. Stories, in contrast to abstract statements of truth, tease us into becoming participants in what is being said. We find ourselves involved in the action. We may start out as spectators or critics, but if the story is good, we find ourselves no longer just listening to, but inhabiting the story."

Peterson goes on,

"One reason the Jonah story is so enduringly important for nurturing the life of faith in us is that Jonah is not a hero too high and mighty for us to identify with - he doesn't do anything great. Instead of being held up as an ideal to admire, we find Jonah as a companion in our ineptness. Here is someone on our level. Even when Jonah does it right (like preaching, finally, to Nineveh), he does it wrong (by getting angry at God {for redeeming the Ninevites - my addition}). But the whole time, God is working within and around Jonah's very ineptness and accomplishing God's purposes in him. Most of us need a biblical friend or two like Jonah."¹

And, I would add, most of us need some biblical friends like the disciples as they are portrayed in Mark's gospel. Here at the beginning, they are willing to leave everything behind to follow Jesus and become fishers of people. But as the story progresses, these same disciples constantly misunderstand his message. They jostle for places of honor at the table, try to limit the reach of God's love, and fail to trust God's provision. They are unable to hear that the willingness to be vulnerable and to suffer for the sake of love is somehow central to the life of faith. They wonder what is in it for them. And when the going gets tough, really tough, and identifying with Jesus is costly, they pretend they don't even know Him. The disciples are regular people, not spiritual giants. They are people like you and me.

The remarkable thing about them is that they respond to Jesus' call and they follow. Someone pointed out to me this week that Jesus doesn't promise them any sort of special reward for following, beyond the adventure of meaningful work. He doesn't say, "Follow me and all will go well for you." He

doesn't say, "Follow me and no hardships will ever befall you, you will never face trials or difficulties, you will never get sick or lose someone you love." He simply says, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people."

Yesterday, a few of us were at the Reformed Institute Convocation at National Presbyterian Church. We were there to hear an address prepared by Dr. David Kelsey, a theologian from Yale Divinity School. Due to heart trouble, Dr. Kelsey was not able to be there in person, but his lecture spoke to the ongoing relevance - on the 500th anniversary year of John Calvin's birth - of Calvin's thought and how Calvin might speak to this time in which we live.

One of Kelsey's points centered on the importance of reclaiming John Calvin's high concept of vocation: that God calls all of us to meaningful work, work that will benefit our fellow human beings. Whether sweeping the streets or serving in the political arena, working in health care or education, being an architect or practicing law, or doing the most menial task or the most exalted one, Calvin's concept of vocation is that God calls each of us and gifts us with talents and abilities to use for the common good. Part of Kelsey's argument for returning to Calvin's high notion of vocation was his claim that for too many people today and in the recent past, the meaning of work has degenerated into simply making money so that we can have things and go on vacation. Now that's not true for everyone, of course. And it was certainly encouraging to hear in people's responses to the lecture how young adults in particular seem to be looking at their time in the work force as an opportunity to serve and not just make money. But it ought to give us pause.

It would be nice if every person in this sanctuary and throughout the world viewed his or her occupation as truly a vocation - a calling from God to use our particular gifts in meaningful work for the common good. If what you are doing now doesn't seem like your true vocation, it is worth pondering how you might better use your gifts and talents for the common good in the world of work. But the wonder of the gospel message is that however you feel about your occupation, Jesus' larger call to each and every one of us is to fish for people - to catch them in the net of the widening pool of light, which is a love with no need to preempt grievance.

Here is good news. We can be about that work whatever we do with our 9-5, or 8-8, or seemingly 24-7 jobs. And it doesn't require leaving everything behind. It doesn't mean you have to leave your job or your family. It doesn't require leaving anything behind, *except your preoccupation with self*. All we have to do is take up the net and step into that widening pool of light which is the reign of God being realized on Earth as it is in heaven.

There are a variety of ways to make that step. You let go of your grievance against some person who has hurt you, that resentment that you have tended and polished and nurtured for lo these many days, or years. You just set it aside, knowing that it is not up to you to judge them. If it were, how many people might be in a position to judge you? And maybe, just maybe, if this Kingdom of God stuff is really true, you might just find that your willingness to lay aside resentment can lead to a reconciliation. And in the process, you might find that not only is the other person caught in the net of love, you are as well.

You hear someone speaking their deep pain, giving voice to their frustration about the way life has treated them and how unfair it all seems. Rather than trying immediately to fix it or to make it better somehow with a word of cheer, you sit with them. You allow them to be where they are, to feel the feelings they are feeling. You make room for them to voice their hurt, and a strange thing happens. In your listening, the pool of light widens. You find that you are both somehow caught up in the net, the net of God's love.

You invite someone to church, not because you think, "Omigosh, we need more people at the 9:00/11:15 service," but because you have found here a community of support which nurtures you in the stories and practices of our faith and gives you opportunities for worship, education, and service. So you think, "My friend would really benefit from being involved here at Immanuel." And another person gets caught in the net of God's love.

You hear, last Friday, that a couple of our Dreamers, Walter and Darious Scott, have been kicked out of school down in the Shenandoah Valley, and you know that they have two options: One is to go to Ballou High School in the District. The other is to go to a school out in Hazard, Kentucky – nine hours from here. The catch is, to go to the school in Kentucky, they have to be enrolled by Sunday morning. So you set aside your best laid plans for the weekend, you pick Walter and Darious and their mother up, and you drive them the nine hours there and nine hours back. Why? Well, it all has to do with the net of God's love. You've been caught in that net, and you want to be caught in it, too.

Last Sunday we had a visitor at the 11:15 service. Gail Niels' friend Teresa Canedo, for whom we have been praying a long time, came with her husband Luis and daughter Daniela to express her gratitude for our prayers and how she attributes them to her healing. She stood up during the sharing of celebrations and concerns to say thank you, but she was overcome. She and her family had been caught in the net of God's love.

I loved the Message for Young Disciples Dan Thomas shared with us last Sunday at the 9:00 service. He told us stories about fishing with his brother, and how Dan caught the biggest fish each time out. He told the kids about the thirty-two inch muskellunge (he turned to the congregation and said, "Okay, it was 24 inches!") Then he told the kids about the twenty-eight inch northern pike he caught. "Okay", he said, "It was 22 inches!"

I didn't grow up in a fishing family like that, so I don't have those kinds of fishing stories. Judith did, and she can tell you lots of good fishing stories, too. But you know what? In my experience, the best fishing stories, the very best ones, involve fishing for people. And we can all do that.

Today, at the 11:15 a.m. service, we baptized little Ryan Southern. Unfortunately, he cried. But whether he cried or not, he's been caught in the net of God's love, too. That is what it means to be baptized: To be caught in that net, which is a widening pool of love, and to be commissioned to catch others in the net as well.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible In Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 1664.