

Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Jonah 3:1-5, 10, Psalm 62, Mark 1:14-20  
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The little Old Testament book of Jonah is one of my very favorites. I consider it a mostly fictional, comedic, short story, written to teach Israel valuable lessons. It is found in the section of the Hebrew Scriptures called "The Prophets." However, Jonah is the only prophet who is told to speak to non-Jews and who deliberately disobeys God's initial call. You will remember that the first time God tells him to go to Ninevah and tell the people there to repent, Jonah gets on a ship going in the very opposite direction. Why? Because the Ninevites were at one time Israel's enemies.

As the story goes, the ship was pounded by rough seas to the point of breaking apart when it was discovered that Jonah was running from his God. (Bad luck) The crew didn't want to throw him overboard, but Jonah convinced them that it was necessary to save them and the ship. They reluctantly hurled Jonah into the tempestuous brine, and the sea immediately ceased its raging.

Jonah didn't bob for long on the tranquil sea before he was swallowed by a big fish. In the fish's digestive juices, Jonah prayed to the Lord, and the text says that after three days, the fish vomited Jonah out onto dry land.

Then we read, "The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying, 'Get up, go to Ninevah, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.'" This time Jonah takes the road straight to Ninevah.

As far as we know, Israel never responded to God's warnings from the other prophets, but the people of Ninevah, who do not know Israel's God, do repent. Rather than being happy about the success of his mission to Ninevah, we read later in the story, that Jonah is very angry with God for being merciful to Israel's enemies. Jonah tells God that he would rather die than live in a world with a God who is gracious, merciful and abounding in steadfast love. God proves to be merciful and gracious toward Jonah, too, even though he behaves worse than a 2-year old.

This brilliant short story is, in my understanding, a ground-breaking tale about a God who can love even Israel's enemies. God's reach is shown to extend far beyond the Jewish people alone at a time when Israel thought God was theirs exclusively. Jesus will certainly further press this message of a heavenly Father who is all forgiving and expects us to love and be merciful toward our enemies as well.

We abhor the vengeance and terrorist violence we've witnessed in France recently and elsewhere. It is hard in light of this teaching not to be like Jonah and wish for God's wrath upon those who profess to hate and want to destroy our western culture.

If Jonah is depicted as an example of how God's chosen are not to behave, Andrew, Peter, James and John are model disciples. Jesus calls and they follow immediately. According to Mark's gospel, it appears that they did something on the spur of the moment that others might have considered reckless or ill advised. Few of us would advise our children at any age to follow after a perfect stranger. I always tell our boys not to leave one job until they have a firm commitment for a new one. Even Luke's gospel retells this story by having Peter first witness a miracle catch of fish before he agrees to fish for people.

If Mark believed that the second coming of Christ was imminent, it makes sense that he would encourage his readers to leave everything immediately for Jesus' sake. Any delay in following the Christian faith might end disastrously.

This doesn't mean that we should never be spontaneous or cast caution aside if the occasion warrants it, especially if it is in service to a fellow man, woman or child. There are plenty of ways to take risks in love on a daily basis without having to leave work, home and family completely.

We can try on a new volunteer activity, perhaps one in the church or in the community that needs people for a worthwhile cause. In February, I'll be inviting men to come to a Saturday morning breakfast meeting to watch and discuss a video by Richard Rohr on "Male Spirituality." Choosing to do something new to grow in our faith or to get help for a personal or family problem is a risk worth taking for sure.

It is entirely possible that the two sets of fishing brothers were soul sick. Their lives were empty even though they came from good families and had occupations that put sufficient food on the table. They literally leaped up at Jesus' invitation because they were starving for something more that maybe they couldn't even verbalize.

We all need to lead meaningful and purposeful lives. We can get all the outward appearances in order, but unless we fill the inner soul with nutritious food, we will always feel incomplete.

How often do we hear of celebrities, people who appear to have it all by the world's standards, giving of their time and resources for the betterment of the world – people like Oprah, Angelina Jolie, Michael Fox, Bono, Elton John, Paul McCartney, Lebron James, Serena Williams, Jeff Gordon, Eli Manning, Tiger Woods, David Beckham. The list goes on and on. Success, fame and wealth are not enough.

We might say, well, they can afford to give. Sure they can, but the fact of the matter is that none of us can afford not to give of ourselves and some of what we possess if we want to lead satisfying lives. But we know that.

I went to seminary with lots of successful professional people who had found their lives unfulfilling. We don't need to necessarily change our occupations, but we can give our present occupations new meaning by finding ways within them to be of greater service to God's people.

Mark tells us that two of the new disciples of Jesus, Andrew and Peter, left their nets to follow Jesus while the other brothers, James and John, left their father. Maybe we are dragging some unnecessary stuff in our own nets that it is finally time to let go of – old habits, hurts or possessions that prevent us from moving forward toward greater health and wholeness.

Or maybe we need to leave behind certain relationships that we think we can't live without, but we know deep down that they cause us harm. Maybe we need to stand up and shrug off old, outdated, parental expectations that keep us in a constant state of adolescence.

There are many ways large and small to more perfectly follow Jesus and thus better fish for people. Everything we do to improve ourselves makes us more useful to God.

Throughout the Bible, God's chosen people are on the move. Adam and Eve must leave the Garden of Eden. Noah sets sail on the ark. Abraham and Sarah journey from home and kindred to the place God shows them. Joseph and later Jacob resettle in Egypt, and Moses leads the people back to the Promised Land. Israel is marched off during two periods of exile and returns years later.

Before the followers of Jesus were called Christians, they were referred to as The People of the Way. We don't have to move physically, but the Holy Spirit doesn't want us to stand still or go backwards in our growth to reach our full stature in Christ.

Following Jesus will never be completely risk free, but the journey, as well as the journey's end, is the Kingdom of God. Even the little bit I know about that kingdom convinces me that nothing else can compare to it. O God, help us all to stay on this road together. AMEN.