
Jonah and the Depths

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Epiphany 3 - Year B**

Follow me and I will make you fish for people. – Mark 1:17

I love it that we hear this familiar gospel passage, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men, I will make you fish for people!” – we hear this familiar passage on the same Sunday that we have an Old Testament lesson from the Book of Jonah!

You remember Jonah, don’t you? And the big fish? The whale?

Jonah didn’t seem to want to fish for people at all. But the big fish, the whale, was sure fishing for people, and he caught Jonah!

You remember, of course, that Jonah had received the word of the Lord to go prophesy at Ninevah, in order to save the people from their evils. But Jonah didn’t seem to want to save anyone at all. From the town of Joppa, he boarded a boat that was headed in the complete opposite direction from Ninevah. Jonah didn’t want the hassle of having to preach truth to people, to bear their anger, and he didn’t even want them to change their minds and repent. He fled in the opposite direction.

But the truth of God pursued Jonah. Storms tore at the boat. The horrified crew began throwing things off the ship. Jonah realized that it was he, Jonah, who was the cause of the furor; and Jonah volunteered to be thrown into the sea. So he was.

A great fish swallowed Jonah. The Hebrew says a “great fish;” it does not say “whale,” though we suppose the creature had to have been huge. I learned the other day that, on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo painted Jonah being swallowed – by what looks exactly like a tarpon! Yes, the sporting fish of the Florida and Georgia coasts, a tarpon – whose scientific name is *megalops* –big-eyed! Take a look sometime at some photograph of the Sistine Chapel ceiling; it’s a tarpon!

Whatever it was that swallowed Jonah—a great fish, the great deep, a perfect storm—it sure had big eyes, and a big inner chamber. Jonah remained alive, but in despair and depressing distress. He was in the depths, in the dark night. He was alone, crying out, lamenting, from a place he called the Belly of Sheol.

For three days he was there in the depths. And, strangely, he changed. His lament became a song of thanksgiving. And when Jonah comes to his senses, the fish—the deep—hurls Jonah back up and out. Jonah is hurled back to dry land. When Jonah comes to his senses, he does follow the original word of the Lord. He walks to Ninevah and prophesies against them. Just as he had predicted, the people there do repent. They change their mind. And, then, as our scripture today so plainly says (Jonah 3:10), God changes his mind, too! God changes his mind from the evil that he planned to do to them.

The Hebrew there, for that word, “to change one’s mind,” is “repent.” God repented of the evil that he had planned to do. Yes, this means that God is known to change his mind.

Jesus mentioned Jonah one day. When some people asked him, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you,” Jesus answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:38-

40).

The Sign of Jonah. The sign of Jonah has been lived into by faithful Christians ever since. Thomas Merton even wrote a set of journals with that title. Like Jonah, he said, "I find myself travelling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox." He would learn, like all of us, that only through death to self, do we find life.

The distress of the belly of Sheol. I know that place as a breathing cavern, a living cavity of empty dark. We all go there. We must go there, if we are to be alive.

I believe that was actually the place that Jonah feared to go. Not Ninevah. Maybe it was not so much Ninevah that Jonah did not want to visit, but it was the depth of self-investigation and self-knowledge that Jonah did not want to visit. But he found himself there, anyway. And, in that deep, he came to his true self. Just as the prodigal son came to himself while in despair. Just as Jesus spent three days in death, and then came to his true self.

Just as we say in our funeral liturgy: "All we go down to the dust; yet even at the grave, we make our song, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia." We, all of us, go down to the grave. We all go down to the deep. But it is in that deep, that we change. We change.

Jonah changed his mind. Then the people of Ninevah changed their minds. Then, wonder of wonders, God changed his mind! (Jonah 3:10).

Yes, even God changes his mind. Or her mind.

The same thing had happened before, when Moses pleaded with Yahweh to save the errant Hebrews after they offered sacrifice to a bull instead of Yahweh. Yahweh wanted to destroy those people, and create a new people, a new offspring, from Moses! But, amazingly, Moses talked God out of it. (It's right there in Exodus 32:14). God changed his mind; scripture says God repented.

Changing one's mind is not a bad thing. It is not only a scriptural command: Repent! It is also a scriptural example. Holy people change their minds. God changes his mind. Jonah changes his mind. Jesus even changed his mind a few times (Matthew 15:21-28). God does not ask us to do things that God, also, is not willing to do.

(I like what George Bernard Shaw said: "Those who cannot change their minds, cannot change anything.")

God is fishing for people, and God wants us to fish for people, too.

When Jonah fell into the depths of the sea, it wasn't a big fish that swallowed him. It wasn't a whale. It wasn't a tarpon. It was God. It was God who swallowed Jonah, in that huge deep. Jonah did not die, but he came to himself. He discovered himself. He changed.

That is the gospel. The gospel is about discovering the truth about ourselves, about others, about the world, and about God. God wants us to go fishing for that truth, even if it means that we encounter some furious storms, even if we fall out of the boat a few times. Even if we get hurled from the boat a few times.

We have sure been tossed about in some storms lately, haven't we? The coronavirus storm, the racism storm, the political storm. These storms have thrown us into some new places, and they have cast us into some deep and dark, isolated places. We have spent time in the depths of distress, like Jonah.

And like Jesus. If we presume to follow Jesus, we will end up in many different kinds of places: We will journey through despair and death, through the belly of a great fish, through the yawning mouth of God. We will end up changing our minds. We will go through change.

And, ultimately, we will discover something incredibly beautiful, just as beautiful as 120,000 Ninevites who do not know their right hand from their left, but who are nevertheless saved!

We will discover the universal salvation of God. God really does catch people, all people. There is no one who is outside the saving reconciliation of God: not the errant Hebrews wandering in the wilderness, not the Ninevites, not the disobedient prophet Jonah, and not even the tired, grumbling, prophet Jonah, either – when, at the end of that book of scripture, Jonah is sitting under a vine, disgruntled and angry that Ninevah had been saved. God saves even that Jonah.

God fishes for everyone. And God catches us, too. No matter who we are. Often, we have to spend three days,

at least three days, a season, a time, in the bewilderment of chaos and despair and lonely isolation. Often, we have to go through the dark night of the soul, the depths of self-discovery and God-discovery.

But God saves us there. In the depths. That is the sign of Jonah. The sign of a good fisherperson. God pulls us out of the depths.

AMEN.

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*