

A Whale of a Tale and Other Stories Worth Telling

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Sermon Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Jonah 3:1-10

Mark 1:14-20

As we dive into the gospel passage, I invite you to look at your hands. Imagine they are the hands of a fisher. The backs of your hands are darkened by the sun. The palms of your hands are strong and tough, calloused over by years of handling fish and their sometimes sharp scales, gills, and fins-- not to mention handling the tools of fishing: hooks, knives and nets. You have been grasping nets all morning, casting and mending them. Your hands know the ropes' texture: rough and stiff outside of the water but pliant and slippery once it is in the water again. You know the smell of the nets. They are not salty, for the Sea of Galilee is freshwater. No, they smell of fish, sure, and also of the sweetness of decay. Your hands know how to feel the nets for loosened knots and holes, instantly attracted to those weak places that need mending. For these nets are your livelihood: it is by them that you earn your own fish and bread.

What could Jesus have said that would make you release your grip on these nets you have been casting and mending since the break of day? "The time has come, the kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and believe the good news." For Simon and Andrew, it was enough to stop casting. Jesus would make them fish for people! For James and John, Jesus' words were enough to stop mending. With Jesus, they would take part in the mending of lives and of the world.

Whatever words Jesus shared with them, whatever good news he told, it must have been a story worth telling. Have you ever had a friend you enjoyed hanging out with because you knew that whatever you did with him

or her, an interesting story would come of it? A person like that-- it is not just the stories he or she tells; their life IS the story.

God called Jonah to tell the story of who God is to the people of Ninevah.

If you grew up going to Sunday School, it bears no need for explaining, for though Jonah is one of the shortest books of the bible, it has one of the most vivid stories that children love to hear and act out. But we are a church of the traditionally churchd *and* the newly initiated to the stories of our tradition, so let me encapsulate it for you:

God tells Jonah to go to Ninevah to warn them of their evil ways. Jonah doesn't want to go. His opinion of Ninevah was so low, he may have even used potty language to describe the place and the people who come from it. Ninevah was the capital of Assyria, which had been an empire of domination for Jonah's audience. So Jonah goes the other direction, hopping on a boat to Tarshish-- which is westward, whereas Ninevah is eastward.

But "God hurled a great wind upon the sea" that threatened the ship's destruction. The worried sailors decided to cast lots to find out which passenger had his god so mad at him as to cause a great storm. The lot fell on Jonah, who volunteered to be thrown into the sea to make his god calm down. The men threw him in; the sea immediately calmed; and God sent a big fish to swallow Jonah live. Jonah stayed in the belly of the fish for 3 days, praying, "then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land." Jonah then went on to Ninevah, like our reading tells us, and preached to them, and they believed God. Their hearts were so turned in fact that not only do the people wear sackcloth and fast in an act of penance, but also the animals do too!

Jonah-- who had no love for Ninevah-- was displeased. He wanted God to destroy Ninevah. Instead, God treated the city with grace. God included Ninevah in God's story of redemption. Jonah had already decided on the

story about this people and what they were capable of. Righteousness with God was never part of the story in Jonah's head. He was not willing to hear where God's imagination and grace might lead him.

For Jonah on so many levels, he had a hard time untangling his hands from the nets he had always cast. How hard it was for him to just leave the nets of his assumptions behind and follow where God wanted to lead him and lead the world.

A whale of a tale, no doubt. Unbelievable, once you move beyond the magical thinking of a young child. Now of course, of what we know of science now, there is no way this story could have ever held true. But I don't think the writers of this text ever meant that it would be. The story of Jonah is clearly a myth, but its meaning is completely true. The story itself is a sort of *conversion* of the mindset that had been in the minds and imaginations of the Jewish people up to then. As a fledgling minority in a world of competing gods and politics, there was the sense that outside influences would damage their tribal security, dilute their faith and weaken their prosperity. So Jonah-- in its view that people of other cultures, even their enemies, can become recipients of God's mercy-- is a counter-narrative to the one dominating the Hebrew bible. The story's truth in Jonah is that God's grace extends far, far beyond the circle of a chosen few-- an idea Jesus and Paul continue in the New Testament.

Jesus Scholar Marcus Borg several years ago. Much of his work had been on the historical Jesus. He was part of the Jesus Seminar, which was controversial because it was a group of scholars that went back to the gospels and history and tried to discern what of the gospels' account Jesus actually did do, or may have done, or said. "Don't mess with my Jesus!" critics said. It was because of people like Marcus Borg that my Southern Baptist deacon uncle warned me against going to seminary because, he said, I might lose my Jesus in the academic study of religion. But Borg emphasized throughout his career that even at the intersection of myth and

history, there is capital-T Truth. While Borg saw much of the bible as metaphorical, the metaphor shapes our *metanarrative* or larger story and adds more meaning to it-- whether or not it actually could have happened. I find Borg's work very interesting, but to me counting marbles over whether or not Jesus actually did something doesn't even matter. What matters is the story, and how it shapes me and the faith around me. And the story changes in its layers of power and meaning depending on the teller of the story, the hearers, and how God's Holy Spirit mingles between them. And so I might hear Jonah's story differently at 4, and 41, and 81-- and the meanings I find at each layer of understanding are all True.

When Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, Mark's gospel reports only three lines he said before recruiting his first disciples: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." And either the words we don't hear recorded in the gospels are so compelling, or the few words Mark reports Jesus DID say, combined with the power of Jesus being Jesus were so beckoning that Simon, Andrew, James and John immediately left their fishing and followed Jesus.

But what if you cannot spin stories as surprising and irresistible as Jonah's and Jesus'? I for one am not the pied-piper sort of pastor. I don't play guitar. I bear no interesting body art like some of the hipster millennial pastors I have met. And I do not have a story of spiraling into a pit of nothingness from which Jesus grabs me by the scruff of my neck and puffs me up with redemption. But I do have stories, and as I listen to my life, I can see places where God's light shines brightly. I also have more stories than I care to admit of when God has called me to act, but I have clung tightly instead to my nets. Pastoral theologian Herbert Anderson claims that if we let go of our nets and open ourselves to seeing our lives as stories of salvation, then "Jesus is not only present in baptisms, church weddings or the celebration of the Lord's Supper but in bathing rituals

between mother and child, the sexual intimacy between [loving] partners, and in the ordinary meals that puncture our existence.”¹

God compels us to share the good news of our faith in spite of our ability to be good storytellers. After all, Jonah couldn't have been a terrific storyteller if he didn't even *like* the people he was telling the story to. Frederich Buechner imagines, “When God ordered him to go to Nineveh and tell them there to shape up and get saved, the expression on Jonah's face was that of a man who has just gotten a whiff of trouble in his septic tank...far from wanting to see them get saved, nothing would have pleased him more than to see them get what he thought they had coming to them.”² And yet, ***the story does not just belong to the storyteller but also to God.*** In the work between telling the story and hearing the story, the Holy Spirit did her amazing work.

Everyone loves a good story. Our bible is full of them. If you have not already, engage the text; mine it for its best stories. Ask others in the church to be your guide in finding them. Use these stories as a foundational layer that adds soul and meaning to your own stories. And most importantly, tell the story of how God is at work in the stories of your lives. Be open to ways it might depart from the story you expected to tell--there may be a counter-narrative at work in your life. Like the song from Sesame Street tells, “don't worry if it's not good enough for anyone else to hear.” Because God will work through you as the teller and those you love as the hearers to somehow make it good news.

Consider again your hands. Consider their work. Think of what familiar things they have been grasping tightly. How can God use these hands to be fishers of people? How can God use these hands to mend lives and mend the world? You may have to open them more to find out. Amen.

¹ H. Anderson and E. Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals* p. 163

² Frederich Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*

