

***“I Will Make You Become Fishers of Men”***

In the name of him who proclaimed, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel”, dear friends in Christ: Today’s Old Testament and Gospel readings have in good deal in common. First, in both we see the Lord calling certain individuals and appointing them to be his agents – to join him in preaching a message of repentance and faith in God’s forgiveness. Second, both readings have something to do with fish. In one we have men trying to catch fish and bring them to the shore, and in the other we have a man who was caught by a fish and deposited on the shore. And finally third, both readings are almost always misunderstood and misapplied.

Take the Jonah account. Here we have the Lord’s reluctant fisher of men. He’s called by God to go east to Nineveh, which was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. It’s in what we call Iraq today. There he is to proclaim God’s wrath and impending judgment on those very wicked people. But Jonah doesn’t want to go. So he gets in a boat and heads west instead. And you know the story. Jonah discovers the hard way that running away from God doesn’t work. First there’s the storm. Then he’s tossed overboard by the frightened sailors. Then he’s swallowed by a fish that God has prepared for this very occasion. Jonah spends the next three days literally stewing in digestive juices. It gives him ample time to reconsider the relative wisdom of his choice. He repents of his rebellion against the Lord. He prays for the Lord’s forgiveness. And the Lord hears his wayward prophet’s prayer. In mercy, he directs the fish to vomit up Jonah on a beach.

That’s where today’s reading begins. Jonah is lying there in the sand covered in seaweed and whatever gooey slime he’s been soaking in. After three days in the total dark he can barely open his eyes. The bright sun nearly blinds him. Ah, but the air – he gasps lungs full of the sweet stuff, trying to purge himself of the foul and fetid vapors he was forced to breathe while in the belly of the whale. And the Lord says to him, “Let’s try this again. Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message I shall tell you.” As we heard, that’s exactly what Jonah does. Apparently he’s learned his lesson.

Except he hasn’t – not really. Oh sure, he’s learned that running from the Lord and refusing to do what he’s called to do is a bad idea. He’ll not make that mistake again. But he still doesn’t want to go to Nineveh. And it’s normally assumed that he doesn’t want to go there because he’s afraid. It’s easy to see why that would be true. The Assyrians were widely known for their cruel brutality. They delighted in coming up with horrible new methods to torture and kill people. They did this to frighten the nations they conquered, to warn them of what would happen should they ever try to free themselves from Assyrian control. Think of them as Nazis of their day, only worse. For a contemporary comparison, for Jonah to be called to preach to the people of Nineveh is like the Lord telling one of us to go to the terrorists who call themselves the Islamic State over there in Syria who are murdering Christians and chopping peoples’ heads off, or to the violent thugs in Africa known as Boko Haram, the ones who are slaughtering people by the thousands and kidnapping school girls and forcing them to become sex slaves – those guys. Imagine being called by God to tell them to repent of their evil ways and to believe in the Gospel of God’s love in Jesus Christ. Raise your hand if you’d like to volunteer for that mission.

I didn't think so. So, yes, it's normally assumed that Jonah was afraid to go; afraid for his life, afraid of failure, afraid of any number of things. But, you see, the Lord made his mission a success. Despite Jonah's worse fears, the Lord opened the hearts of the people of Nineveh to receive the prophet's message. They repented in sackcloth and ashes. And the Lord then relented of the disaster he had threatened to bring on them. The people of Nineveh – even those hard-hearted sinners – were saved! So the usual application is that we too need not fear to tell others about Jesus and the Gospel of salvation through faith in him. As the Lord protected Jonah, he'll protect you too. So get out there and share the good news!

Unfortunately, that's not what the story is about. It's true that Jonah was afraid to go to Nineveh; but he wasn't afraid for his life, nor was he afraid of failure. He was actually afraid of success. Yes, that's right: Jonah didn't want the people of Nineveh to repent and to be spared by God. He wanted the Lord to destroy them. He judged them unfit to live. He was afraid that if he went and proclaimed God's Word to them, they'd listen and God would save their lives. And it's ironic. We could ask, who is the greater sinner here? The people of Nineveh, who were spiritually blind, idol-worshipping, pagans doing only what comes naturally to those who are in dark; or Jonah, who knew the Lord and had the light of his Word, and deliberately defied him? Clearly Jonah's offense is worse. Yet he prayed to the Lord for forgiveness and received it; but he would deny that same grace and forgiveness to the Ninevites. The Lord saw that they got it anyway. He *made* Jonah a fisher of men, even though Jonah didn't want to be one.

Interestingly, Jonah's story has been seen as a microcosm of Israel and her relation to the world's other nations. God in his grace and mercy chose Israel above the others, and gave them his Word and precious promises. They were to be a light to the nations, drawing all others to the salvation of the Lord. But they refused to do it. Instead they imagined themselves to be superior to the others – “the Lord chose us because we're better than they are” – and they hoarded the saving Gospel and kept the light of God's truth to themselves. Thus they denied to others the same grace and mercy that they depended upon. And we do the same thing here in the Church when we fail to share the good news of Christ crucified to save sinners such as us.

We ought to be, or so we're told, more like fishermen in this morning's Gospel reading. Unlike Jonah, who ran from the Lord when he called, these four men dropped what they were doing on the spot. No hesitation, no second thoughts; at the Lord's summons they got up and followed Jesus. My, what dedication! What eagerness to serve! They were ready, willing, and able to become fishers of men when Jesus called.

Except they weren't. That's a total misreading of the story. It's not like these four were sitting there thinking, “I'm sure getting tired of this hard work and having to handle stinking fish all day. I hope Jesus stops by soon and calls me to be a disciple.” It simply wasn't that way. You see, these four had been with John the Baptist for a while. Like a lot of people, they'd gone down to the Jordan for a spiritual retreat. They'd stayed for several days listening to John teach about repentance and the coming of the Savior. And it happened that while they were there, John pointed Jesus out to them and told them that he was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The four of them then followed Jesus back to Galilee. The point being they know who Jesus is. No doubt they heard him preach too. But they weren't interested in becoming his disciples. We know because in those days, the student picked the teacher. You applied in person and asked to be taught. None of them did that. No, as Jesus is going about the towns and villages of Galilee preaching and teaching, they're fishing. Of course: that's what they do. And that's what they intend to go on doing. Besides, they've got families to support. They have homes to take care of. They have their business to run. It's safe to assume they

have plans and dreams for the future. And they don't include becoming a disciple of Jesus or a preacher of his Gospel.

It's Jesus who has other plans; plans to make them his disciples and fishers of men. That they respond immediately to his call is not about their willingness to go. No, it's about the power of Jesus' Word. By his speaking, the Lord makes the unwilling, willing; just as by his speaking the Lord calls the dead to life and the darkness to light. Jesus, by the power of his Word, made them become fishers of men.

The funny thing is that in the years that followed, after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, his disciples – now designated apostles – suffered from pretty much the same affliction Jonah had. They thought that the Gospel of God's grace in Christ was for the people of Israel only. None of them had any desire or interest in sharing the good news of Jesus with people from other nations or races. It's what most of the Book of Acts is about: how Jesus by steps and various methods, pushed them out of their parochial mindset and narrow boundaries and sent them to preach his Gospel to Gentiles in all the world. He *made* them become fishers of men.

And perhaps the greatest irony is the man Jesus chose to really open that door: Saul of Tarsus, who became the Apostle Paul. It's fitting that I mention him because this just happens to be the day the Church celebrates his conversion. But if there were ever a man who became a fisher of men against his will, he was the guy. Recall that he was a self-righteous Pharisee and the self-appointed destroyer of all who followed the Gospel of Christ. He was doing to Christians in Syria then what the Islamic State is doing to them now. And like them he firmly believed that by doing so he was fulfilling God's good and holy will.

But then Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road. He was struck blind. And as he lay in the dust terrified, the Lord told him to get up and go into the city and wait there. As Jonah was three days in the fish for his rebellion, so Saul sat three days in the dark, trembling in fear over what he imagined the Lord would do to him for persecuting his faithful. In deep sorrow and repentance, he prayed for the forgiveness he knew he could never deserve. And the Lord heard him and answered his prayer. The Lord sent a man named Ananias (another reluctant fisher of men) to Saul in order to restore his sight and to baptize him. Through Ananias, Saul came to understand God's amazing grace in Jesus Christ – and how it was meant for all people, even great sinners like him. And receiving Christ's forgiveness, he was compelled by God's love to share it with others. Jesus made him become a fisher of men.

And Jesus does the same thing today. By his Word and Spirit he makes us his disciples, and he shows us how truly evil it is to sit quietly by depriving to others the grace and mercy we have received from him in such abundance. In this way he breaks our hard hearts and brings us to repentance. And then, freely forgiving our sins for the sake of his suffering and death, he fills us with his love so that we are compelled to speak of the things we have seen and heard. Thus he overcomes our fears, our sins, and our selfishness, and he makes us become fishers of men and heralds of his good news. May this his work continue in us that his will may be done and his kingdom come to many who as yet remain outside his covenant of grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***