

January 24th, 2021  
First Lutheran Church  
Fish Stories  
Pastor Joshua Graber

Grace and peace in the name of God our loving Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Barb our administrator was showing me photos from her tour of the Holy Land this week. Even though theologically, I don't believe Jesus or God is any more in one place than another, I have to admit I am very jealous of the people who have gotten to travel to the places Jesus and his disciples lived and ministered to the world.

The place that Barb and I gravitated to the most more than the shrines to events and people, was the waters of the Sea of Galilee. Imagining Jesus and his disciples on those shores, captures my imagination. This is where Jesus' ministry and the church began. Not in a castle or palace, but along the shores of the lake with this small group of poor fisherman.

When Jesus comes to this first group of fisherman, it is likely that these are people he knows, at least some of them. Sarah and Paul have been very interested in detective stories recently and have been watching whatever kids versions of Sherlock Holmes they can. The Tom and Jerry version is on rotation the past couple of weeks. But biblical scholars also are good at detective work and our Tuesday morning Bible study at First, recently studied the mother of James and John, two of the disciples mentioned in the Gospel of Mark as among the first to be called. We discovered through detective work that they were likely cousins of Jesus. The mother, Salome, according to one gospel, is

present with the other women who go to the tomb on Easter and in another it says that Mary's sister was there, if they are the same person that would make Salome Jesus' aunt and her sons James and John, Jesus' cousins. It's interesting to look at photos of the Sea of Galilee and wonder how Jesus was seen by those first followers as familiar even family, or a revelation, or both.

The story of Jesus calling the disciples comes up a lot during this part of the lectionary cycle, and it is fitting during a time of year when First Lutheran and many other churches have Nominating Committees operating and calling new leadership to be a part of council and other opportunities in the coming year. Someone asked me recently what the difference between a disciple and an apostle was and the simple explanation is that disciples follow someone or something and apostles are sent by someone or something. We as Christians are both called to follow Jesus and his way and go on that way making disciples of all people, in a role that is more apostolic and connected to the mission of Jesus first followers... when they go from being disciples of Jesus to being sent by him and led by the Holy Spirit to share the good news themselves. Our churches are reflections and balance of those leadership roles, based on how people most feel called to follow Jesus and join his mission. Both roles are valuable in a church and necessary, because for us following Christ and being sent by him are always intertwined.

These early disciples would be sent out into the world to share the good news of Jesus and many would meet their deaths, as He did, as part of that call.

When we think about the way Jesus calls the disciples to fish for people, we often think of Jesus calling into an abundant life with him, multiplying people living in the good news, but at the heart of the good news is the news that

death is not the final judge of human hearts. That losing our lives for someone else is the mark of discipleship and the place Jesus goes before us. Jesus shows us that there is new life, new creation after death. When Jesus is telling these disciples that they will fish for people. They are also caught in a net of these truths that could lead them to lose their life for the sake of others, the same way a fish in a net loses its life in order to provide life to others. Being a fish in Jesus' net is also symbolic of dying to the world. Christians are called into a new reality, a new way of seeing that changes hearts and minds. People that are called into this net, may feel like a fish out of water in that new reality, but it is the process of dying to the old self and letting God's new creation in.

In the Gospel of Mark, we read this morning, the main character of the story is plucked out of the storyline right as it begins, like a fish being pulled out of the water on a fishing line. There is no explanation of why or what happened to him, until late in the story. But this man, who the Gospel of Luke names as another one of Jesus' cousins, had been proclaiming and practicing a baptism of repentance before Jesus' ministry began and then is gone.

Repentance is often understood as a turning from one way or direction to another in a physical way. But it is also a turning of the heart and mind, as reflected in the word used when Jesus says that "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." God's time is showing up. The word for repent "Metanoia" is a way of saying that the repentance is in response to what God is doing. The new creation God is making in the world is also happening in the hearts of those caught up in the net, so they see things differently, they value things differently than the world does. They are pulled into a new way of seeing and being.

That is what Jesus ministry is all about. Pulling people into this new way of seeing. Announcing a transformation... God's reign on earth and being a part of it. It leads to new life that is not defined just by the human time between birth and death. God is not defined by time in that way, and through Jesus' death and resurrection, and our baptism into it, neither are we.

That is the amazing experience at the heart of the call story of the disciples and it is at the heart of our call stories too. It is a changing of hearts to see God's power and action around us. It is letting love lead even if it takes us into harm's way. It is an ability to see our lives as opportunities for others to live. To live into God's change and create change and to live into God's time and God's new creation.

We are reluctant like Jonah preaching to the Ninevites. We only do half the job. We would rather experience comfort than pain. We grow attached to our earthly things and earthly pride. Those nets pull us away from the change of heart that bears more good news, more fruit in the world. But keeps coming for us, not just for a one time change of heart, but every day of our lives.

We think of Jonah as a fish story, because Jonah is swallowed by the fish. We rarely think of Jonah as the fish in the story, but that is the fish story God tells us through it. Jonah tries to escape God's call like a fish swimming away from a net. God uses a fish, a really big fish to catch Jonah and bring him back to his path. The mission he has been sent on to preach to his enemies. He doesn't want to do it because he knows God is "gracious" and he wants his enemies to be judged, not to be given an opportunity to repent.

These enemies are given an opportunity to change their hearts and align with God's power and vision, and miraculously they do. But the story of Jonah is also the story of Jonah as the fish, that is called again and again into repentance: to see the world as God does. Jonah is invited into the possibilities of a God who invites others into this vision, even our enemies. Just as we are invited into that vision again and again.

As we follow God's lead and as we listen to the Spirit's call on our lives, may we remember our baptisms each day, each hour, and moment and remember that it is an invitation into God's time and God's way of seeing, a way of following and a way of going. We always have this line back to a God whose love is always there for us. It is a net that brings us into God's presence and a kingdom reality that helps us to see the world as God does, and to see our lives as opportunities to bring life to others. Amen. May it be so in our hearts.

May the promises of God light up your hearts tonight and the hope, love, joy, and peace of Christ be with you!