

Going Fishing

In the name of him who calls us to follow him, dear friends in Christ: I don't know many people who don't enjoy going fishing now and then. There's something inherently satisfying in displaying man's mastery over (at least a small part of) nature: casting the line, sinking the hook, fighting it out, and reeling in a catch – particularly if it's a big one. In my experience, I've found that I'm very good at the fishing part, but not so great at the catching. I've been out with others on occasion, all of us using the same bait, same equipment, fishing from the same boat. They'll catch the limit. I don't even get a nibble. I'm not always so unlucky, so I still enjoy it even when I don't catch anything; but I'd hardly call myself a fishing fanatic.

But I've known some people who are. These are people who live and breathe the sport. They spend small fortunes on boats, equipment, and gear. They are forever planning their next fishing trip adventure. They make their own lures and meticulously tie their own flies almost as if they think they can psychoanalyze their prey and know what the fish will find to be most appetizing. When unable to fish themselves, they read fishing magazines and watch fishing shows on TV. The walls of their dens are lined with the skillfully mounted carcasses of the more spectacular victims that fell to them. Whenever you engage them in conversation, somehow the topic inevitably turns to their favorite one: fishing. Yes, I've known a few individuals like that. Have you?

I expect that some of you will say "yes"; but before anyone answers "no", stop. You *do* know at least person like that. You see, the Lord is a something of a fanatic fisherman. Jesus himself said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind." The Lord *is* a fisherman, the first and greatest of them. But as we heard in today's Gospel, he goes for the biggest and most cunning of all game fish. The Lord goes fishing for men. And to accomplish this, he first has to catch the men he wants to use as his fishers of men.

However, the thing about fish is that they don't particularly care to be caught. They'd rather stay submerged in the watery habitat that they call home. They don't like being pulled into the foreign atmosphere above them by a hook stuck through their lip, or to be dragged there struggling against a net. And in that sense, men are like fish. They fight against the Lord who desires to catch them – not to eat them, but to save them. And even after having been caught and saved by the Lord, they show themselves unwilling to serve him by fishing for others.

Certainly that's what we see in Jonah's story. He was a called prophet of God who served in the 8th century before Christ, preaching to the northern Kingdom of Israel. He lived in a time of comparative peace and prosperity for the nation. Their long-time enemy neighboring nation, Syria, with whom they had almost constantly been at war had fallen to the growing empire of Assyria. Israel took advantage of their neighbor's sudden weakness to reestablish old borders, lands that had been lost in previous conflicts. And without having to spend so much time, effort, and expense on war, the economy began to boom. It was a great time to be an Israelite.

But then the Lord told Jonah that he wanted to send him on a special fishing adventure. He told Jonah, I want you to go fishing for me in Nineveh. Wait a minute. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. They weren't Israelites. They weren't God's chosen people.

They were godless pagans. They worshipped dumb idols. Worse, they were widely feared for their violence and savage cruelty. The nations they conquered and greedily gobbled up into their empire suffered severely under their harsh brutality. They were like the Nazis of their day – only worse.

Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh and preach the Lord's coming judgment on them. And it wasn't because Jonah feared them. It wasn't because he thought his mission would fail. No, Jonah feared that his mission would succeed. He was supposed to preach that the Lord would destroy Nineveh in 40 days. And he said to himself, good. Do it, Lord. Destroy them. They deserve it. And don't let me warn them that it's coming. If I do that, they might repent, turn from their evil ways – and then you'll likely spare them. Oh, no. That's the last thing I want to see happen.

And so, as you know, Jonah hopped into a boat heading in the opposite direction, away from Nineveh. Jonah most certainly did not want to go fishing for the Lord. So, it's ironic the way it works out. The goal in fishing, of course, is for a man to catch fish. The Lord turns it around. In Jonah's case, he uses a fish to catch a man.

I can't imagine that accommodations aboard the *SS Fish*, the world's first passenger submarine, were very pleasant or comfortable for Jonah. And yes, it was more likely a whale of some kind in which Jonah took his three day cruise; the Hebrew language doesn't make that distinction. Still, lying in there tightly squeezed against the creature's stomach lining, with whatever it had for supper the evening before, digestive juices raining down on him, and what little air he could breathe smelling of noxious gasses and vomit, well, let's just say that conditions were right for Jonah to rethink his reluctance to go fishing for the Lord.

And too, he had opportunity to reflect upon the immense magnitude of his sin. Yes, the people of Nineveh were extremely evil. They did horrible things. They were also godless pagans, completely in the dark spiritually, with zero knowledge of the Lord and his just and gracious ways. We have to expect people who are in the dark to live like people in the dark. It's only natural. Jonah, on the other hand, lived in the light of God's truth and love. He knew God's grace and mercy – he received it for himself. And yet, his wicked heart would happily deny it to others. Whose sin is greater? The unenlightened pagan who sins against others in time, or the believer who wants to see others damned to an eternity in hell?

There can be no question that Jonah's was the greater sin. And yet, the Lord showed him mercy when he repented. He forgave his sin. And, after he had Señor Fish deposit Jonah on a beach, he called on him a second time to go fishing for him in Nineveh. As we heard, Jonah did go. Not eagerly; but he went and accomplished the mission. He was caught in the Lord's net and had discovered that it was both unwise and futile to try to escape it.

We see pretty much the same thing happening in today's Gospel. Upon hearing of John's arrest, Jesus picks up where John left off by launching his own preaching and teaching ministry. But whereas you had to go out into the wilderness to hear John, Jesus brings his message right to where people live: in their towns, their homes, and even in their places of work. And we can detect urgency in his message: the time is fulfilled. It's happening now. There's no time to waste. Repent of your sins and believe the good news of God's grace and forgiveness.

The harvest being plentiful but the laborers few, Jesus decides that it's time to begin gathering and training those who will be his fishermen in the days to come. He further decides it

best to recruit first some men with fishing experience; two sets of brothers: Andrew and Peter, and James and John. These men know Jesus. They were with John the Baptizer several months earlier when Jesus returned from his 40 days of temptation in the desert. John revealed to them that Jesus was the promised Messiah. He pointed Jesus out and said, "Look, there he is: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." After that they sat with Jesus while he did some private teaching. They came away believing that John was right. Jesus was indeed the promised Savior.

But none of them was even remotely thinking of following Jesus and learning from him as a full time occupation. Why would they? They had families to feed, bills to pay, and a fishing business to operate and manage. They had their own lives to live. Besides, there's no pay in becoming a disciple. As a matter of fact, in those days you paid for the privilege. If you wanted to learn from a rabbi, you applied to him and offered to pay for lessons. Then *if* the rabbi judged you a worthy candidate and *if* he decided you offered enough, he might take you on as a student.

Jesus breaks the mold in calling his disciples. He comes to them while they're at work fishing and calls them to follow. "I will make you fishers of men." Amazingly, they drop everything on the spot. They leave their boats, their gear, their livelihoods, and they follow Jesus.

Much is made of their willingness to do so. They are often held up as examples of faithfulness for all of us, that we too should be so willing at a moment's notice to leave it all and follow Jesus; but this misses the point entirely. The truth is that Jesus has cast his net over them. It's not their willingness, it's the power of Jesus' Word that overcomes their unwillingness – in precisely the same way that the power of his Word stops storms, raises the dead, and commands a fish to swallow a recalcitrant prophet.

The Word of Jesus makes the unwilling willing. By his Word he conforms our sinful, rebellious will to his. It's the net that gathers the fish into his kingdom. You can fight against it like Jonah with most unpleasant consequences, or you can cooperate with it like the four men in today's Gospel; but the will of the Lord will be done. It's best to go along with it.

And as you do, you will find increasingly that the will of Jesus becomes your own. Jonah went to Nineveh, preached the message he was sent to deliver, and then became angry that his mission succeeded. He still wanted to see Nineveh with all of its people destroyed. His heart hadn't changed much. The disciples we know did change. No, not all at once; we'll see them bickering among themselves about who's the greatest and wanting to call fire from heaven on hapless Samaritan villages, but they learned. And when they understood the whole message and mission of the Savior, once they had truly repented and believed the Gospel in its entirety – how through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's Son, all sins were atoned for – they eagerly sought to extend God's kingdom of forgiveness and mercy to as many as would receive it. They had acquired Jesus' own heart of compassion for the lost, and were happy and honored to be his fishers of men.

So may Jesus by his call to repentance and good news of forgiveness for his sake change our hard hearts, make us true disciples, and as opportunity arises, his fishers of men. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!